M. Despard

Wandering Fires

Vol. II

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WANDERING FIRES.

A Novel.

BY

MRS. M. C. DESPARD,

AUTHOR OF

'CHASTE AS ICE, PURE AS SNOW.'

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

This chance of noble deeds will come and go
Unchallenged, while you follow WANDERING FIRES
Lost in the quagmire.

TENNYSON.

London:

SAMUEL TINSLEY,

10, SOUTHAMPTON STREET, STRAND.

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WANDERING FIRES.

Part III.—WOMAN AGAINST WOMAN.

CHAPTER II.

MISS GORDON'S FORGETFULNESS.

> A lighter love
> Will lighter instincts in him move.
> These joys, these raptures of mere sense,
> Senseless, enjoyment's pure pretence,
> Must surely cloud all innocence.

From the old garden, with its apple-trees and roses, its pleasant green bowers and soft velvety sward, we must transport ourselves to busy London—London in the height of the season, aflame with life and excitement.

In a large house in a well-known square, it would almost seem as if, on this particular occasion, the excitement was concentrated. Through the whole of the afternoon its bell was tinkling.

So impulsive had been her welcome to the clergyman that, apparently, she had overlooked his companion. She had not loosened her grasp of Mr. Crampton's hand. She was looking at him with glistening eyes, and the pleasant, girlish enthusiasm became her well, when Mrs. Clifford thought it right to remind her of her duties.

"My dear, another gentleman—"

Miss Gordon dropped the clergyman's hand, and looked round. Erick Græme was her other visitor; he was standing in the embrasure of the window.

She hesitated, as if in doubt, then advanced a few steps. "I am afraid I have not the pleasure—"

"So you do not preserve the memory of *all* old friends, Miss Gordon," said Erick, a smile on his lips, but slight annoyance in his manner.

She pressed her hand to her forehead. "No, really, this is *too* stupid. I seem to have seen you somewhere, and yet, for the life of me, I cannot recollect where."

"Now, I ought to scold you, my dear girl," spoke out the voice of Mr. Crampton from the sofa. "I met this old friend of yours quite

casually; had not seen him for more than a year. I told him where I was going, and he begged to accompany me; but if this is the way in which you treat old friends, it is the last time I shall bring any of them to see you.

Miss Gordon turned to the sofa with a little pleading air. "I have such a bad memory; you know that of old, Mr. Crampton. *Do* enlighten me."

"But I sent in my card," said Erick, frowning a little. He did not wish to be rude, but he could not believe in this forgetfulness.

"And I," said she, laughing out a clear, silvery laugh, "was in such transport at the sight of my dear Mr. Crampton's card, that I threw down the flowers all in a heap. Oh! Mrs. Clifford, Sir James's gardener sent me *such* a number of beauties! What was I saying? Yes, I know. I ran in at once, without thinking of the other card. But I am not quite so stupid, after all. I begin to remember you—a little, that is to say. Can you be the Mr. Græme whom I met two or three times at Dover?"

"Two or three times!" Erick Græme was still rather young, so far, at least, as knowledge

of women was concerned. He was so taken aback by this cool impudence, as to be, at the moment, at a loss for an answer.

Mr. Crampton came to the rescue.

"Right this time," he said. "I thought you could not have entirely forgotten. Ah, Mrs. Clifford, when I remember those days! You have probably heard of the sad occurrence, how my two beautiful girls were stolen from me. It was a deeply mysterious dispensation —a father's heart—you understand me? I have never recovered from the shock,—never."

He looked tolerably florid and comfortable; but Mrs. Clifford, who was a very nervous woman, rose hastily and rang the bell.

"Allow me to offer you a glass of wine, Mr. Crampton. Eleanor, my dear, tell him to open a bottle of old port."

She was afraid, she said afterwards, that the man would faint or something.

Eleanor, in the mean time, was trying to make up for her temporary forgetfulness by treating Erick Græme with a certain gentle cordiality. There was in the gaze she fixed on him now and then a mute appeal, which he could not fail to understand.

She had acted unwisely in the past; girlish enthusiasm had led her astray. She was trying to be good—to separate her past from her present; he would help her, would refrain from betraying her to her new friends. Erick Græme would not have been a man, certainly not the chivalrous young man he professed to be, had he not, on the spot, condoned her offences, determined that, so far as he was concerned, Eleanor Gordon's past should remain the past.

The clergyman, on his side, was languidly enjoying the choice wine set before him by his hostess, talking placidly of the affairs of the nation in general, of the neighbourhood in particular,—talking down to her comprehension. Riches and unbroken prosperity have a rather enervating effect upon the mind. Mrs. Clifford was so accustomed to allow others even to think for her, that her mind had become as flabby, as wanting in consistency and energy, as her body. While he spoke, her eyes were wandering first over him, then over his companion. Mr. Crampton bore about with him the true clerical look; Erick Græme was always the gentleman.

"You understand me, Mrs. Clifford?" Mr. Crampton was saying at the end of one of his long harangues about parish matter. "Not for my own sake; my views are large; I take in the future."

His words were swimming—a sound, without sense—in her brain. She answered her own thoughts. "Then you have no engagement for this evening?"

"This evening?" repeated the clergyman.

Eleanor, always watchful, had caught the tone of embarrassment; she gave her hostess the cue. "We should be glad—" she began.

Mrs. Clifford looked up sleepily. "Yes, I meant to say that. We should be so glad to see you this evening—a little dance, you know."

"Scarcely in my line," smiled Mr. Crampton; "still—" There rose before his mind visions of an excellent supper.

"And your friend?" continued the lady, "Mr. Graham."

"Mr. Græme," corrected Miss Gordon.

"The same thing, my dear. We shall be delighted to see him, if—"

The sentence dropped in an indistinct

manner. Mrs. Clifford's sentences had this painful tendency.

"If you will forgive the short invitation," filled up Miss Gordon. Her tone was soft, she dropped her eyes; she would not show him how much she hoped that he would accept the invitation. And the maidenly reserve, the gentle timidity, pleased the sensitive young man. He had a feeling, poor moth! that to flutter about this bright flame would be enlivening. The routine of a rich man's life, into which, in spite of himself, he had fallen, had begun to pall upon his taste. He craved for novelty. This it was which had led him to make use of his chance-meeting with Mr. Crampton. He wished to see once more the woman who had fascinated him long ago. He was curious, and her manner stimulated the feeling. Having seen her, a strong desire possessed him to find out whether she cherished any memory of the past,—whether she were actually as indifferent as she would make him believe herself to be.

"I shall have much pleasure," he answered, addressing Mrs. Clifford, but watching Miss Gordon. And—he could not be mistaken—

there was a little tremor of excitement in her face, the faintest flush tinged her cheek, she looked happier.

Erick Græme was young and impressionable, and flutters and tremors are infectious. What wonder, then, that he left the house a little flattered and dazed? He had intended to forsake London for a time, that he might give himself up to books and pen in the country. The materials for a poem, which was to take the world by storm, were floating in his brain. That very evening he had purposed to devote to a scientific *séance*, at which was to be discussed a new theory, deeply interesting to him, as illustrating some of his own pre-conceived ideas. But—he had seen a woman's face, and it, rising up like a vision of the past, filled the vista of the future.

Obeying, as usual, the impulse of the moment, Erick Græme drove home, wrote an excuse to his scientific friends, then sat down, a book in his hand, to dream idly. And the dream was of no poetic fancy, no creature of the imagination. The light of those eyes that haunted him was certainly earth-born, the fingers that beckoned him were pink and white.

"Eleanor," thought the young man; "strange I should never have known her name before! It is pretty, it suits her." And then, looking over at the mirror,—"How artful women are! to pretend to forget *me;* but she did it so gracefully. Yes, Eleanor, I forgive."

The evening was wearing away; but slowly enough. Erick rose lazily from the sofa, and passed into his dressing-room.

CHAPTER III.

BALL-ROOM AND CONSERVATORY.

There—One, whose voice was venomed melody,
Sate by a well, under the night-shade bowers;
The breath of her false mouth was like faint flowers,
Her touch was as electric poison,—flame
Out of her looks into my vitals came,
And from her living cheeks and bosom flew
A killing air, which pierced like honey-dew
Into the core of my green heart, and lay
Upon its leaves.

Eleanor Gordon was in her glory. She was fluttering about the ball-room, virtually doing the honours of the evening, for poor Mrs. Clifford, after the painful exertion of dressing, or rather of being dressed, of seeing a number of splendid toilets, many of which, she feared, outshone her own, and being forced to speak a few words to the different guests, had utterly collapsed. She was always depressed and frightened on these occasions, although not for the whole world would she have allowed

the season to pass without giving two or three evening-parties. She had taken refuge on a settee in the corner of the room, with fan and smelling-bottle, an old gentleman fluttering about her, as in duty bound, she utterly unable to give attention to his rapid flow of small-talk.

Eleanor looked very fair, in a dress of shimmering silk, trimmed with rose-coloured ribbons. There was the flash of diamonds on her hair and neck. People asked one another who that distinguished-looking girl could be. She was surely no relation of Mrs. Clifford's. Where could she have picked her up?

The poor orphan-girl held her head erect, and trod proudly. Thanks to Mrs. Clifford's diamonds, and her own good taste, she could outshine them all—these girls with fathers and mothers and lovers; these girls with fortunes on their backs, and money at their command. As one of them passed her by, a modest-looking girl, with flaxen hair, so pale as to be almost colourless, innocent blue eyes, and red lips,—a child, though she had passed her twenty-first birthday,—Miss Gordon was forced to turn away, that she might spend the involuntary flash of vexation on an unhappy waiter, who

had made some blunder; for Miss Clifford, niece of the master of the house, was a great heiress.

She passed on to her aunt, leaning on her father's arm; and presently Miss Gordon, who had her own circle of admirers, saw the young men gather round her. Gertrude Clifford was a favourite, though she was neither so clever nor so fair as Eleanor, and not only on account of her money. Perhaps it was because she was so gentle. She seemed scarcely able to hold her own in society—was always throwing herself, as it were, on the companion of the moment, appealing to his forbearance and kindly feeling.

But, gentle as she was, it seemed evident, on this occasion, that Gertrude sustained her part with an effort. She showed little interest in her partner's light talk. Miss Gordon, who faced her in a quadrille, noticed that her eyes wandered restlessly about the room—that she made her partner impatient by two or three random answers, and a general inattention to what he was saying. It was unlike Gertrude, whose *rôle* was self-forgetfulness, and Eleanor determined to find out what it meant.

How lynx-eyed women can be when they

watch one another! Miss Gordon, talking all the while, in the pleasantest way, to her partner, listening with deep interest to a long account of his late experiments in Alpine climbing, had her eye and her ear open for her rival. Poor, transparent little Gertrude! *Her* eyes were on the door. Suddenly they dropped, her face flushed, she looked up at her partner intelligently this time, and laughed out a merry little laugh at one of his oft-told tales. *He* thought he was interesting her at last—was delighted with himself, and wondered how it was that he had never thought Miss Clifford pretty before. She looked pretty as she stood there, her red lips parted in a smile, her delicate cheek flushed, her blue eyes gleaming.

And Eleanor, who smiled too, knew whence the beauty came. Looking round, she had seen the dark face and tall stately form of Erick Græme.

"So," she said to herself, "my lady knows him. A capital match: money on both sides;" and, involuntarily, she clenched her little fist. "Don't think it, my dear," she muttered.

The quadrille was over. Making an excuse to her partner, "I have everything to do, you

see, dear Mrs. Clifford is *so* delicate," Eleanor crossed to where Gertrude's old father sat in a corner, placidly watching the fluttering of his darling's dress, as she passed and repassed him in the dance. She was the only daughter he had left; her sisters had died of consumption years before, her mother had followed them.

Eleanor stooped down to the old man's ear.

"I promised to look after our dear Gertrude," she whispered. "I advise you to make her rest a little. The child looks feverish."

The old man started up. "Where is she? Yes, yes, thank you a thousand times; it is quite true, my darling is flushed. I shall have her ill. Will you do me the further kindness of begging her to come here to me? She is such a dear, good child. Tell her—yes, tell her I am tired of sitting by myself."

Erick Græme had seen Miss Clifford. He had met her two or three times before, and had liked her. There was something real in her character, which had won the young man's respect. He was making his way to her, through the crowd, when Eleanor, always rapid in her movements, forestalled him.

"Gertrude, dear," she whispered, in her

softest tone, "I am so sorry to alarm you, but—"

"Is anything the matter with papa?" cried the girl. "How selfish I am! Where is he?"

"Don't be frightened, dear; I really think it is nothing. Only he seemed to want you; said he felt a little tired of being alone. Come this way."

And, beckoning the old man into an anteroom, Eleanor established him there, with his daughter, turning away from them then, with a little, low laugh.

Another moment and Erick Græme was at her side.

"That poor little nervous girl!" she said, anticipating his questions. "I really do believe she is frightened of you. She seized hold of me, just as I saw you making your way towards her, and insisted upon my taking her to her father. An heiress, you know, that poor girl has been trained to think that every one who looks at her has a design upon her liberty. I am glad *I* am not an heiress."

"Are you?" said Erick, who was seriously annoyed with Miss Clifford for her strange behaviour. "Well, I think I am glad too; and

now, I suppose, having come, I ought to make myself useful. Are you engaged for the next dance?"

"No, but I want a rest. I have been working *so* hard. It has been an exciting day too. Excitement, mental wear and tear, upsets one even more than work."

"And if I may presume so far, Miss Gordon, what has caused this mental excitement?"

His question was asked with little earnestness; his manner was slightly satirical.

She sighed, and looked down. "You are stiff with me, Mr. Græme. Yes, it is kind,—right. I would not have it different. Only—"

She had drawn him towards a small conservatory which opened out of the drawing-room. It was quiet and in semi-darkness. Within were star-eyed blossoms and dark glossy-leaved foliage.

Erick Græme stood under their shadow. The broad disc of a full moon silvered them over, touched lovingly with its beams the fair woman in her shimmering dress. It trembled on the diamonds, which gave back an answering brightness; it shone on her face, making it look pure and unearthly, and on her eyes, which were

soft and melting, like violets dipped in the morning dew. Erick Græme had been feeling dissatisfied with himself. Perhaps Gertrude's child-face had restored him in a measure, but his soul was, above all things, that of an artist. He gazed at her in the warm, heavily-scented air, drawing back his breath with delight.

And thus for a few moments they stood silent, face to face, then she threw out her white arms appealingly.

"Why did you come here at all?" she cried. "Why did you seek me out? I was happy, and at rest. I—had—forgotten."

Her voice sank into a kind of wail.

"Forgotten!" said the young man, in a low voice. He was under the spell, and he knew it; but, at the moment, he could not even desire to be free. "Eleanor, did you wish to forget?"

He put out his hand, but she shrank back into the myrtles, her eyes flashing out on him through the moonlight.

"When I was misunderstood—despised," she murmured. Then, clasping her hands, and looking up into the star-spangled skies,—"He thinks I would not *wish*. Heavens! if he could only

have seen me in those days of misery! And he comes back calmly, coolly; is surprised that I could even desire to *forget* him! Oh! it is bitter—bitter!"

She bowed her head upon her hands, while real tears came trickling through her fingers.

And Erick, as he watched her, felt almost beside himself. Pity, admiration, self-reproach, and love,—not, perhaps, love of the spirit, but the intoxicating, overpowering love of the senses,—were all raging in his heart. What could he do? what could he say? With all his boasted knowledge of the world, he felt, in this woman's presence, as helpless as a child.

"Eleanor," he cried, piteously, trying to draw down her hands from her face, "I have been wrong,—I know it; but, listen to me now."

Another moment, and he was on his knees before her. He had both her hands in his; he was looking up into her face with such burning, earnest eyes, that Eleanor literally trembled.

"What was he about to say?" she asked herself, for *she* could reason still. He was so absorbed as to forget everything, but that she was there, before him, in her beauty; that

she had not forgotten; that her tears were flowing for him.

Another moment—her eyes looked expectant, his dilated—a pause,—the music had stopped, there was a bustle outside. Instinctively Erick Græme sprang to his feet. Calm, pure eyes were gazing at him, a sweet child's face was set in the halo of the silvery moonlight. Erick went forward a step, Eleanor busied herself with a tall white lily, whose support had fallen. Gertrude was the intruder. Her face was very pale, but her voice was soft and kindly.

"Mr. Græme, we have been looking for you everywhere, my father and I. Your servant has just brought in this letter. It is marked 'Immediate.' He seemed to think it of great importance."

Reader, do you know what it is, after the burden and heat of a fierce summer's day, when the senses are throbbing, when the blood is at fever-heat, to plunge, in the evening's shadow, into the bright waters of a stream, to see the cool, crystal flood flowing soft over the whiteness of wearied limbs, to lie down on banks of moss, to rest in the calm silence?

Something like this Erick Græme felt that

evening, as his eye fell on the pale face of the messenger, who had come to him when the heat of passion was raging in his soul. Even then he was grateful. But he said nothing, only bowed over the gentle hand, with murmured thanks.

Then he looked at the letter. It seemed to surprise him; he started, and changed colour; but in a moment he was himself again.

"Miss Gordon," he said, turning to her, "I find this is a matter of some importance. Will you kindly make my excuses to Mrs. Clifford? I must go home at once."

"I am sorry you must leave us so early," she murmured.

Gertrude had gone out into the drawing-room. Erick, by the light that streamed in at the opened door, examined his letter more attentively.

It was in Ethel's handwriting, the "Immediate" in large letters, and as if the writer had trembled. Miss Gordon, too, looked at the letter, which was open; the address in printed letters, brilliant with purple and gold—looked, and drew back a step. She was acute, she was watchful; she thought she had made a discovery.

"Good-bye," said Erick, holding out his hand.

"Good-bye," said Eleanor, clasping it warmly.

He went out into the crowded room, she stayed in the conservatory alone, with clenched hands and knitted brow.

What was that look in her face, as she sat there, that dreamy weariness in the eyes, those strange contortions of lip and brow? Not altogether the disappointment of a baffled *intriguante*—no, its root lay deeper. Eleanor Gordon had played with hearts, drawn them into the fatal circle of her power, only to spurn them, to cast them from her, when the good they held for her, their very life's blood, had been sucked out.

It was thus she had meant to play with Erick, and the Fates had avenged themselves. Like the gentle "lady of Shallott," this wily woman, who had despised woman's weakness, was fain to cry, "The curse has come upon me." As a boy she had despised him; she had thought to despise him still, but the beautiful dark face, the burning eyes, the stately form of the man, had drawn away the woman's heart.

Alas! poor Eleanor! She had enjoyed a long immunity from the common fate. It was this which had enabled her to preserve a young girl's freshness—it was this which had given her power.

Eleanor Gordon never blundered, never went a step too far, because her heart had been free and untrammelled. While others felt, she could reason. Thus, with cool hand and pulseless heart, she had ruled society. But the fate had come—woman's fate.

And, suddenly, with a pang of almost terror, this woman felt it.

"I love him! I love him!" she moaned.

Smoothing back her hair, she pressed her hand to her burning temples. "Oh! but this is foolish," she murmured. "How shall I play my part before them all?"

A moment, and they were all forgotten; the frown passed into a smile.

"I think he loves me," was her thought; "he could not have looked at me like that—" And then, with a sudden contraction of heart, came the unacknowledged sense of something like the truth. He did not really care. She might draw him to the brink, no farther; she

could not hold him. The soul, the ineffable essence of the man, would never be hers.

Thus she pondered idly, while, around her little solitude, the music and laughter, the ripple of silks and muslins, the trampling of feet, flowed on.

Already Eleanor Gordon was committing mistakes,—already she was forfeiting her right to the title of a cool, calm queen of society.

There was a plaintive, complaining voice near the door of the conservatory.

"Eleanor! Where is she? Where can she be?"

Hastily Miss Gordon came out into the light.

Mrs. Clifford was wandering about helplessly. "My dear girl," she said, fretfully, "where have you been hiding? So many things to be seen after; I am really quite exhausted. They are all asking for you, too. I thought you must be ill. Flirting, you know—"

But Eleanor interrupted her. "I have been alone in the conservatory, dear Mrs. Clifford. I was a little tired; but I am rested now. *Do* let me get you an ice. You look very tired."

Mrs. Clifford sank contentedly into the nearest chair, while Eleanor hovered about her, ministering to her wants.

CHAPTER IV.

THE SLOW NIGHT-HOURS.

> Go, thank thy God that He hath given
> Night upon day.

"COME to us. Madame is ill. She wants to see you at once.—ETHEL."

This was the whole of that letter, marked "Immediate," which had reached Erick. Was it opportunely, or the reverse? He did not think of this, as he drove rapidly to the nearest railway station—he was in time for the last train—indeed, he could think of nothing but that his old friend was ill, perhaps dying; that there was something very strange and abrupt about Ethel's letter.

And yet, as the darkness deepened, as he went on rapidly into the night, thoughts came fast upon him. His pulses were beating quick and high. Such moments as those through which he had passed that evening do not come

often in a lifetime. Never before, perhaps, had Erick Græme been so absolutely enslaved by the passion of the moment; never had his soul been more utterly antagonistic to his senses.

He was a strong man, but in the heat of that summer night he shivered. He was like one on the brink of a deep abyss, saved by a step only from destruction.

For in this these two years had changed Erick but little. The soul's reaching out after an ideal life, beautiful but unattainable, still ruled him, or would have done, had it not been for that other strain in his nature. Pleasure-loving and self-indulgent, he could not always be great, nor, indeed, just. In his early youth he had promised himself the life of the poet,—one guiding star, gentle and pure, to attend his steps, to reflect his quiet joys.

It was all planned in his own mind. That day at Calais had decided the matter for him.

He had impulsively taken Ethel and Blanche under his protection; the one was to be his wife, the other his child; the future of both would be assured. He had, in the mean time, given them a quiet home with the old Frenchwoman, whom he had rescued from starvation;

believing rightly that her tender care, with the refined grace, the stately old-world courtesy, the knowledge of life and society, which this true gentlewoman possessed, would be the best education he could procure for them. To Ethel he had said that Madame de Motteville was his dear friend; that she was old and solitary; that she wanted young hands to help and comfort her. The young girl had felt that her presence was pleasant to the old woman. Thinking nothing of the future, she had given herself up, with youth's glad confidence, to the present.

It had come naturally to her and Blanche to think of Erick, and to speak of him, as their brother. His desire that they should, for the time, be called by another name, had seemed strange at first to Ethel's reflective sixteen years; but, the strangeness passed, she believed Erick only wished to hide them. She had lived in so simple a way, that the thoughts which might have come to other young girls of the same age did not affect her. It did not enter into her head that they were deceiving the kind old friend who had taken them to her maternal heart. Naturally, and for the sake of their filial feeling towards their father, she and

Blanche had refrained from talking about their past. There is to the young a kind of shame in unfolding the weaknesses of those who are, or ought to be, nearest to their lives. The old Frenchwoman, with instinctive delicacy, had respected their reticence. And they had not much time for thought. They were busy with books, pens, music—making up for lost time.

It was only during these last months that Ethel had become uneasy,—had felt vaguely, in the consciousness of her budding womanhood, that this state of things could not last. Often, in those days, she had gazed at her old friend's calm face, often she had longed to speak out her heart; but with the desire would come a sudden shrinking,—the words would die away on her lips, her tongue would falter.

Ever, as the days wore away, what she had done seemed more serious, the difficulty of speaking seemed greater. The old Frenchwoman had noticed this difference of manner. It had made her a little uneasy; she felt herself responsible for the young girl, and feared that some outside influence had been brought to bear upon her life.

But of this she had not dreamed in her most

anxious thoughts. For the revelation, coming as it did, in a flood of penitent misgiving, meant much to the high, pure soul of the old Frenchwoman.

Madame de Motteville knew life well. She had walked in its high and in its low places; here and there she had touched pitch, but her spirit was not defiled. Still, she was French: she had lived in Paris, she knew what intrigue meant; and with the disclosure, so terrible to her, coming as it did from lips that had seemingly been innocent of guile, some of the dark stories of her youth had forced themselves on her mind, bringing a weight of horror which bowed her even to the brink of the grave.

For, in that first moment, the whole story had flashed itself in upon her brain. He, the young man she had loved for his beauty and kindliness, she had taken to her heart as a son, had saved her for this, that she might be an instrument for carrying out his purposes. One by one, with cruel persistency, all the incidents of that short past forced themselves upon her mind, forming, by their united strength, a chain which, as she believed, no mortal hand could break.

"They love the French polish, these English milords," she said to herself; "he tied me to himself, bound me by my gratitude, till, weak, old, foolish, I agreed to all his wishes."

She thought of their arrival, of its mystery; how she had been wakened, at the dead of night, to receive, as she thought, the sisters of her benefactor,—of Ethel's tears, of her reticence.

That they were no ordinary children, the old woman had seen at a glance. The stately grace which had come so naturally to the elder, with her growth and development, the refined beauty of the younger, proclaimed them well-born.

Perhaps, and Madame de Motteville wrung her weak old hands as she thought, they were scions of some noble house; perhaps he, their presumed guardian, had stolen them away for some purpose of his own, having first won over the elder by his dangerous fascination. And to the consummation of this iniquity, she, who, in the midst of her own deep troubles, had ever preserved clean hands and a pure heart, had lent her willing aid.

Recovered from that swoon which had

frightened Ethel in the garden, the beautiful old French lady passed into her own room, there to think, and pray, and weep. And, at first, even Ethel was banished. She was hurt, wounded on every side. Erick, the son of her love, had deceived her; Ethel, the child she had taken to her heart, had agreed in withholding the truth; even Blanche, fair little Blanche, who came on tip-toe to the door of her room, to ask if she could bring *ma mère* a cup of tea, if she could bathe her head, even the fair child was being trained to deception.

Early in the evening that note, which reached Erick in the ball-room, had been written by Ethel; for she was frightened at the effects of what she had done; and Madame de Motteville, in her state of semi-consciousness, had cried out for Erick with an exceeding great and bitter cry. Fearing to trust to the post, she had sent a messenger, who was, happily, in time to catch an evening-train.

Thus, while the old woman was weeping and wailing in her room,—while the young girl, oppressed by this horror, till her head swam, till she felt like one lost in an unimagined wilderness of desolation, lay outside her door,

not venturing to enter,—while Blanche, who had been forced by her special maid to go to bed, was sobbing herself to sleep, Erick Græme, the unconscious cause of the misery, was speeding towards them through the night, no thought of this in his head. In the little house by the sea-side, its dull, dead hours passed heavily away. Ethel at her watch, Madame de Motteville in her agony, prayed for the morning.

But, with the passage of the slow, sad hours, calmer thoughts came to the old woman. Her fears had, in a measure, spent themselves by their first violence; she prayed, in the night-time, kneeling before her little crucifix, and gradually a stillness fell upon her spirit; her face resumed its old restful lines, a glimmer of hope had dawned in upon her darkness.

"The good God knows all," she murmured, softly; "He knows I did it for the best."

Yes, this was comfort to her; but for the children, for Ethel, who, unknowing, had compromised herself so fearfully.

"I have been selfish," thought the old woman; "I have judged harshly; *she* is not sinning, only mistaken,—only betrayed."

There was a gentle knocking outside. Sighing, Madame de Motteville rose, and opened her door. Ethel was standing there, in the darkness. She put out her hand.

"Come in, poor little one!"

The girl burst into tears. "*Ma mère*," she cried through her sobs. "Is it so *very* dreadful, this thing that I have done?"

"Tell me all about it now, Ethèle," replied the old woman, gravely. "Yes," she continued softly, "it will be rest to thee and to me. It is a good thing to put off the burden. I have put off mine, told it out to the good Lord. Thou dost not yet know this comfort; but the human ear is ready; and for the rest, for the higher blessing, it will come with the years, —the dark, heavy years."

She was sitting in her favourite arm-chair by the window, through which, already, the faint light of dawn was beginning to peer. Her silver reading-lamp cast its warm glow on the pale, agitated face, the waves of tawny hair, the white, crumpled dress of the young girl, who was kneeling at her feet. As the old Frenchwoman spoke, she looked down, and

touched the girl's warm cheek lovingly with her withered hand.

"There is too much passion here," she murmured. "Little one, thou wilt have need of patience; but tell it to me now."

And, raising her heavy eyes, full and honest as ever, Ethel told her simple story, so very simple in all its details: of the dreary life at home,—of the pleasure that had come into it,—of that night in the woods, and its strange promise,—of the dark influence in her life,—of the final crisis, her father's blow, their flight.

Then, in lower tones, and a broken voice, for her woman's instinct had whispered of her danger, she told of their passage that night, of her anxious thought, of the stranger, of their meeting with Erick, of the rest that had come to them through him.

"And oh! *ma mère*," said the young girl, in conclusion, clasping her hands and looking up at the silver crucifix which stood before her on the table, "do believe me, Erick only meant to do right. If it has been foolish, it was my fault, not his. I *could* not go back. I would have done something to earn my bread; but there was Blanche. And, then you see, I thought

—that is, I did not know." The warm flush was mantling Ethel's cheek, she hid her face in both her hands—the rest was said beneath her breath. "I thought *you* were taking care of us, *ma mère.*" For, on this night, the true knowledge of her position had come to the girl of eighteen, with a bitter sense of humiliation. During those two long, happy years—happy, as they had passed away, but, in this moment, how unspeakably miserable, in the retrospect he, a stranger, connected to them by no stronger tie than that of friendship, had been providing for them entirely.

As this idea came upon her in its full force, the young girl, proud and sensitive, felt not only humiliated, but angry.

She threw out her hands. "What shall I do? what shall I do?" she cried. "This is too dreadful, *ma mère;* I cannot bear it. Let me go away at once, let me *never* see him again. Why," her face was haggard, her voice sounded hollow and old, "why are we allowed to make such dreadful mistakes? Why did everything go against me, *ma mère?* What have I done more than others to be so miserable?"

But the old Frenchwoman, who had shivered

a little as the tale flowed on,—she had feared something so much worse than this,—had resumed her wonted calm. She laid her hand on Ethel's arm.

"Patience, *ma mie*, it *is* a tangle. Yes, that is true, but, with the help of the good God, it may all come straight. Lie down now and try to rest."

CHAPTER V.

BLANCHE IN THE GARDEN.

She stood beside him like a rainbow braided
Within some storm.

THE morning came, soft and fragrant, with the gay singing of birds, the rustling of leaves, "the many twinkling smile of ocean." Its light shone on an old face and a young face, both pale, both sad, resting side by side in the calm immobility of sleep.

It shone, too, on a brighter younger face, not resting, but all alert. Blanche had forgotten her troubles of the evening before. Then madame had been ill, Ethel mysterious and sad; then there had been some grief or trouble in the air, which oppressed her young sympathetic heart; now, she had peeped very timidly into madame's room, she and Ethel were sleeping so quietly that there seemed no cause for further alarm. Blanche thought wisely that

sleep would be their best remedy. She took her own new milk and roll, found her leghorn hat, and went out into the sunshine, to enjoy, in her own way, this unusual liberty, for, as a rule, Ethel kept her younger sister hard at work.

This was Blanche's hour for practice at the piano, which, as the little girl was volatile, Ethel overlooked. But Ethel was asleep and madame not to be disturbed, so, with a very clear conscience and a heart light as air, Blanche opened the French window of their drawing-room, ran down the steps, and was soon busy chasing a brilliant butterfly from flower to flower.

The two years had changed Blanche less than Ethel. From fourteen to sixteen is not such a leap as from sixteen to eighteen, and at sixteen Blanche was a child—absolutely a child, with all a child's simplicity and unconscious grace. She loved Ethel; she loved *ma mère*, as they both called Madame de Motteville; she loved the flowers and trees, the soft grass and pleasant sunshine; she liked Erick's visits, for they brought a holiday and an excursion. She liked him because he was always kind to her, and because Ethel did. Further than this her feelings did not extend.

She and Ethel sometimes talked together of their old home, but it was only to contrast it unfavourably with the new. In Ethel's anxious thoughts about the future Blanche had taken no share, for she did not even know that they existed. Ethel had been accustomed in all things to take the lead, to think for them both.

The sisters were still very different, although time had changed the elder from an awkward girl into a graceful woman. Ethel was large, well-developed for her age; her arms and neck were full; she was above woman's ordinary stature; her movements were rather slow; she still seemed to want self-confidence, although the stately grace of the old Frenchwoman had done much to improve her. About Ethel there was no prettiness, but warmth, colour, glow. In some of the Florence churches there are glorious sculptured forms, half-woman, half-angel, brooding, with downcast eyes and thoughtful brow, over monumental stones. Ethel might have brought them to the mind. Such beauty as she had was of this type. It was large, majestic, brooding.

Blanche was *petite;* her features were small and delicate, her hair was the colour of gold,

her eyes were bright and soft. In all her movements she was rapid, but very graceful, because utterly devoid of self-consciousness. She seemed a creature made to be loved.

Humanity is divided into two great classes —those who give and those who take. The sisters were ranged on the different sides.

Blanche was made to take,—gracefully, it is true, unconsciously,—but still to take; to absorb interest, to drink in love and tenderness; to give, in return—all she had, poor child!—sweet smiles, clinging affection.

Ethel was on the side of the givers. With her loves, which were intense, came the passionate craving to be herself something in the life of the loved,—to make their happiness, to increase their good.

But to return to the summer morning, the beautiful old garden, the gay wanderer. The butterfly had escaped her, and, always active, Blanche was looking for something else to do, when there came to her ears the sound of carriage-wheels. Their house stood alone in its own grounds; no other was very near. Blanche stopped to listen.

The young girl was not afflicted with shyness.

Whoever the visitor might be, she was quite ready to do the duties of a hostess. And certainly the visitor was for them, for, as she ran lightly along the gravelled path which led to the front garden, the carriage drew up.

The kitchen door was at the side of the house, so hidden with evergreen shrubs and climbing roses, as not to be recognizable to the uninitiated. An old woman in short skirts, her cap and muslin apron as white as the driven snow, was standing under the trellised doorway listening, for the sound of carriage-wheels at this hour of the morning was unusual.

"Barbe," cried Blanche, in her clear, ringing voice, "some one is coming."

"Wait then a moment, Mademoiselle Blanche," answered the old woman. "Let me first see who it may be. Ah!" as the child darted round the corner, "*ces Anglaises* would be free as the winds of heaven."

Les bienséances were dear to the heart of the old French servant. To her the least transgression of them was a crime. After giving one glance behind, to make sure that the girl under her was busily at work, Barbe trotted away after Blanche.

She was just in time to hear the young girl's delighted cry of recognition. "Erick, Erick!"

"*Ah! c'est Monsieur*," said the old servant; for Monsieur was a very well-known person in the establishment. She dropped a low curtsey.

Erick's face looked anxious. From Ethel's imperative summons he feared the worst; and to him, too, during those hours of travelling, some bewildering thoughts had come. He had not slept that night; he looked dishevelled and careworn.

But Blanche's gay unconcern was very reassuring. From the over-strain of imagined horrors, it brought him back to gay realities. This was not the kind of arrival he had fancied.

"Well, Blanche," he said, "*you* look all right. Where are Ethel and Madame?"

Here the old servant came forward, with another curtsey. "Madame has been ill, sare. Yesterday; it was in the evening, she—"

"Fainted," filled in Blanche.

Barbe nodded approvingly. "*Mais oui*, Monsieur, dead away, as they say about here. She was better then, and would have us go to bed, all but Mademoiselle Ethèle, who looked ill, too, herself. Now, *Dieu merci*, Madame and

Mademoiselle are both asleep in Madame's room. We thought it not well to awake them. But Monsieur will take some refreshment?"

"I will go to my room," said Erick, looking down on his hands, grimy with the black dust of travel. There was always a room for Erick in the cottage. He liked to be able to come and go in this pleasant little retirement, of which, indeed, he was the virtual owner.

Blanche tripped along by his side, full of her simple chatter. They had found a stray dog, —such a beauty; no one claimed it. It was to be hers. They had been out on the sea with an old fisherman; she had caught two mackerel, Ethel had caught nothing. Ethel was beginning to sing so beautifully. Signora had told Madame she had a very fine voice.

It all fell upon Erick's ear like the unmeaning jangle of bells, for Barbe's words were in his mind. Ethel had seemed ill, too; Madame had fallen into a sudden faint; they had been together all night.

Something very near the truth dawned in upon him, as, glad to get rid of Blanche, he sat down alone in the cool little white room they called his. There had been a disclosure. He

had vaguely feared it, for he, also, had felt a change in Ethel's manner; he had noticed her growing uneasiness. The gay, sisterly confidence, with which she had been wont to greet him, had passed into a kind of reserve. Once or twice, indeed, she seemed on the point of speaking to him, but something had always intervened.

Erick felt angry with Ethel, as he thought out the matter, pacing his room restlessly. "She might have trusted me," he said to himself. "I intended to make everything straight; but women are all alike, timorous and selfish."

The fact was this. Erick could not bear to be put out of his own groove.

He had been so accustomed to consider himself a power, to look upon himself as the sole arbiter of his fate, and that of some others,—Ethel, perhaps, chiefly,—that he was impatient of anything that interfered with his designs. And the scene of the evening before was near to him, its sweet poison was running through his blood.

He did not wish to bind himself yet. He would enjoy a little longer youth's pleasant freedom.

He had intended, honestly, righteously, but the week before, to tell his old friend everything. Now, as he feared, she had been told—told differently. She could not understand all the circumstances, she would misjudge them both; probably, too, would consider it her duty to hasten him on to a decision of some kind. It was just the wrong time.

Even now, at this moment, when his indignation against her was at its height, Erick could not bear the idea of losing Ethel altogether; for he was accustomed to her,—she had become, in a certain sense, necessary to his life. She had been, during these last years, his glad, appreciative *confidante*. Besides—for Erick was not altogether selfish, though his was the danger all self-pleasers run—what other plan could he find for the children themselves?

But as he began to think out this knotty point, having disposed, for the moment, of his own grievances, there came a knock at the door of his room. He opened it. Barbe was standing there, a cup of strong coffee in her hand. "Madame had sent it," she said, with the message that she was up, and would be glad to see him as soon as he was ready.

It caused a sudden revulsion of feeling. For the first time in his life, Erick was afraid. The young Englishman, bold and confident, who would have faced, if need were, any number of foes in fair fight, was actually afraid to meet the calm old Frenchwoman whom he had rescued from starvation. Only, perhaps, herein lay the difficulty. He had bound her to himself, and then deceived her; besides, his only plea for justification had been cut away from under his feet. He had thought, with the truth, to give her knowledge of his plans for the future; the unity of his simple plans had been broken, there had come, into his harmony, a discord; the Wandering Fires, beautiful but wild, had fascinated his unwary heart,—unthinking, unknowing, he had followed where they led.

Drinking the fragrant coffee, which seemed to clear away some of the mists from his brain, the young man thought—What policy should he pursue? The anxious face that looked back at him from the mirror, cleared a little as he pondered. He would do as he had done before, he would try delay; the discords might possibly be unified,—he could not decide then—at once.

CHAPTER VI.

MADAME'S ADVICE TAKEN.

Truth is the strong thing,
Let man's life be true.

It was a lovely little room, into which, after a few moment's delay, Erick was ushered by Barbe. Looking round, he could see, on every side, traces of his own thoughtful affection. For this had been planned and furnished by himself, more than two years before, on the model of that little dazzling room in Paris, where she, in whom he had taken so deep an interest, had opened her eyes to a new life.

Pale blue curtains, fringed with lace, adorned the alcove, wherein was the little French bedstead, sole sign of a sleeping apartment; doors, painted in white and gold, shut out the *cabinet de toilette*. For the rest, it was furnished as a sitting-room. A deep bay window overlooked

the sea; within was a small, richly-carved ebony table, which held Madame's reading-lamp, her ivory crucifix, one or two books of devotion, and a few choice flowers, renewed every morning by Ethel's loving hands. Madame was sitting beside it. She wore a soft black silk; a kerchief, bordered with rich lace, was fastened over her breast by a diamond-headed pin; ruffles of the same fell over her hands.

They were all Erick's gifts. He could not help feeling this as he crossed the room; but it only increased his boyish timidity. The young man had a deep love, a reverent admiration for the beautiful old French lady. He could not think, without a pang, how she must have misjudged him; and this display of his munificence was almost ostentatious.

She was sitting idle, her hands crossed on her lap, gazing out at the many-coloured morning sea. She was in a reverie, and the door had opened, Erick had half crossed the room, before she was quite aware of his presence.

She looked up then, but at first neither rose nor held out her hand, only fixed her eyes on

his face, searchingly, as if she would read into his soul.

Her silence seemed to grieve Erick.

"Mother," he cried, pleadingly. He knelt down before her; he touched her soft, old hands; he brought the dark beauty of his face close to hers, and, in her turn, the old woman trembled.

Leaning back in her chair, she closed her eyes. "It is too much," she whispered, "I cannot bear it."

He was strong and young; he gloried in his manhood; but, as he heard the plaintive voice, something like a tear forced itself into his eyes.

"Mother," he said again, very gently this time, "you will listen, will you not? You have saved me once, you will not desert me now?"

She had laid her hand, almost unconsciously, on his head, with an old loving gesture. The sense of his words did not seem to have come to her.

"It would be better if he had left me," she murmured, "for I cannot believe him false."

Erick's face flushed. "Thank you," he said, "thank you, for this at least. And now, will you listen to me for one moment? I know you

have had bad thoughts of me. I deserve some of them, but not all—no—indeed no."

She might have been a queen, this soft-looking, weak, old woman, but hers was the strength of a noble soul, of tenderness of heart, purity of conscience.

"*Mon fils*," she answered, very calmly, "I would not judge you harshly. It is true that, in the night, when this knowledge came to me first, I had some terrible hours. May the good God forgive me, I even wished to die, for all the goodness had gone away out of my life. I am grieved still, I cannot deny it. I say to myself over and over, as I sit here, 'My children have deceived me.' But—" the weak voice faltered, she looked down into his face, as she had looked into Ethel's. "Erick, son of my affection, you did not mean it, then, when you saved me? If I knew it, I think I should even die."

The dark flush mounted to Erick's brow. "You have thought even *this* of me," he said, mournfully.

"Peace," she answered, laying her hand on his brow. "I had not seen you then; now, I think it no more."

"But you must hear all," he said, almost passionately, "for even you have never known what the sight of your face, the story of your life, did for me then. *Ma mère*, I owe myself to you. Was it doing so *very* much then to give you out of my abundance the power of being still a blessing, in a world that is in need of the tender and the pure? You have heard how my youth was spent; how I was shielded, lovingly, it is true, but unwisely, from the very knowledge of evil, guarded from any kind of contamination. I became a dreamer, delighting chiefly in the unreal. Then my good aunt, seeing her error, thought to correct it by sending me abroad, with a tutor, a man recommended for the purpose by our man of business in Scotland. This tutor was about twenty-five years of age; he had taken high honours at college, was clever, plausible, and a first-rate linguist. That man was a scamp. At home I never told them of our many escapades, the drinking, the gaming, the *petites aventures*, because I joined in them readily enough; besides, though sometimes disgusted, I enjoyed to the full my new freedom. We spent money right and left, with a lavish hand; but this was

a matter of small moment. My guardians in Scotland were liberal, and they wished me to see a little of life. I wonder if any of the old fogies had the slightest conception of what seeing life is to a young man, with money and liberty. We spent at last three or four months in Paris; you know a little what this means. My tutor and I entered into the life of Paris thoroughly. I was beginning to have a taste for the kind of thing—drinking and gaming, turning night into day, sleeping through the sunlight. I thought I would establish myself in Paris, making it my head-quarters. I was losing self-respect, getting reckless; study of any kind became distasteful to me. I could not bear the idea of returning to my quiet home in England; my dreams and ideas of a higher life were passing from me, sailing away, like white clouds, into measureless heights. But I was dissatisfied with myself all the time."

The young man had risen; he was standing looking at the old Frenchwoman; his arms were folded, and she was weeping, the pure tears of the aged were forcing themselves from under her dropped eyelids.

"It was one of those times," he continued,

softly, "I was alone; my evil counsellor was kept to his room by a racking headache. I was in the Champs Elysées; too languid even to walk, I had taken a seat under the trees—you know the rest—but not all—how shall I tell you? *Ma mère*, was it an inspiration from above that made you look round at me that day, a mother's yearning love in your face? or did I only fancy the look? was it meant for some dream that had come to you in your weakness? All I know is, that from that moment I loved you; that the goodness in your face seemed to draw me away from the evil. I wonder if you ever heard that I carried you in my own arms that day to the nearest hotel. The crowd pressed round me; they would have taken you from me, to place you in a *maison de santé*. I said you were my mother." He knelt down again, and laid his hand reverently on hers. "You *are* my mother," he continued earnestly; then, more rapidly, "from that day I have thought that God gave you to me to be the good influence in my life. For Heaven's sake, believe in me, love me, or I shall give way; I shall go wrong."

He stopped then, and she, shaking off the

tears from her face, put both her hands on his broad shoulders.

"*Mon fils*," was all she could say in the first moment, for a weight seemed lifted from her heart, a cloud passed away from her soul. In this light she could understand all his tenderness.

"Thank God!" she murmured softly. "But, yes, did I not know that He was good? *Mon fils*, we should praise Him, you and I,—you in life's opening, I passing away to the unseen land."

She had forgotten everything but this, that she had not been deceived in him; that her son was, at least, true to her. And Erick could not speak, he felt awed; the veil of time seemed to have fallen off from his spirit; he was a child again, with a child's faith in the invisible.

There followed a kind of embarrassment. It is seldom that a man of Erick's age reveals himself. He had been led on by the impulse of the moment to speak of what he had never spoken before to mortal being. A little awkwardly he rose to his feet, and, to hide his confusion, stooped over the beautiful bunch of yellow roses which were in a small vase on Madame's table.

She looked up with a little start.

"I am a selfish old woman," she cried. "I had forgotten all I meant to say. The roses bring me to my senses, remind me of my other children. *Mon fils*, you were foolish not to tell me long ago; I would have counselled differently it may well be; but, *Dieu merci*, nothing is past remedy in this world, when life is young and hearts are strong. I may, indeed, be wronging you even now. Is it not true that you are betrothed, that you always intended to make this young girl your wife?"

He bowed his head, as if in assent; but the keen old eyes were scanning his face.

"It must be yea or nay, *mon fils;* now or, indeed, never. The children can remain no longer here on any other pretext. The heart of poor Ethèle is nearly broken that she has taken so much from you already."

He shook himself a little impatiently. The girl of eighteen had not the same hold on him as the old woman of threescore years and ten.

"Give me time," he murmured.

Madame de Motteville looked grieved. "Then it is even as I feared," she said, sadly. "You have repented already of the good you meant;

but I dare not urge you. It was a mistake, and for mistakes some one must pay. For this one, the children suffer. Give me your arm, *mon fils*. I go to tell Ethèle, to send her away at once."

"At once!" cried Erick, taken aback by this sudden decision. "What do you mean? Where can they go?"

"To their father. We have found out where he lives. Ethèle would have started already this morning, had I not withheld her by urgency of entreaty. Think of it, my son. She is no child, she is a woman. Has there not here, too, been deception?"

"Deception?" repeated Erick, his face flushing.

"A hard word, *mon fils*, and with many meanings. We call it one thing to ourselves; it is different, indeed, when it meets us on the lips of others. *I* have thought you were brother and sister; *la pauvrette* persuaded herself that I protected her. Is there no deception here? And come, what have you told yourself —not the very truth, my Erick? Do I not know it all? Have you not said in your heart, 'I take them for a purpose; I shield them from

ill. I give them education; I will protect them ever; and when, in days to come, I bring them out to the world as my wife and sister, who shall dare to complain of the means I have used?' And, *en attendant*, there steps in—what? I am no magician, *mon fils*, only an old woman, who knows the world. A pretty face, shall we say? It may even be many a one,—bright eyes, soft manners, ringing voices. Yes, do I not see the world's game? And the weak heart is moved, and the childish dream departs; and *la fillette* at home looks pale and *gauche*, is wanting in all this glitter and tinsel. Then, says the heart, we must put off decision, for we are young, and life is long; and as things have been, so they may remain. But," and the old woman rose from her seat, her voice changed suddenly, "know, young sir, that you have erred. This cannot be; *I* will prevent it. Ethèle must suffer; yes, for she, too, has been to blame, but not in her conscience; nor, as I believe, has her heart been touched. The stain will rest upon her name; *this* we cannot avoid; but, heart-whole, she shall go out from here to her own legitimate protector."

Erick had thrown himself on a chair. As

Madame's weak voice flowed on, he had hidden his face in his hands. Every word was so true that it scathed him to the soul. He despised himself; felt as if his weaknesses were being torn from the friendly shields he had instinctively thrown around them—dragged out into the light of day. But he could not be angry with Madame. He was angry with himself—a little, that is to say; but much more so, perhaps, with Ethel. And yet those last words brought the keenest pang of all. Ethel was heart-whole; she cared nothing for him; she had not seen through his designs. This it was that made him rise and pace the room.

Madame de Motteville moved towards the door.

"Stop one moment," he cried. "I have said, give me time, *ma mère;* I think you are hard on me. Listen for five minutes. Believe that I wish to do what is just."

She re-seated herself. "I do believe it, *mon fils,*" she said, softly, trembling a little as she spoke, for the old woman loved him—this strong man, whom her light words could sway; this boy, who loved her with more than a son's devotion. "You will let me know everything now, Erick," she continued.

"It is hard to tell," he answered, and paused for a few moments while the old woman waited patiently, her hands folded in her lap, but at last he found words. Stammering and flushing like a girl, he repeated the tale of his folly; told how, with this surging in his blood, he found it difficult, almost impossible, to speak to the pure young girl, whom, nevertheless, he admired and loved.

"Not in the same way," said Erick, mournfully. "*Ma mère*, advise me."

The keen old Frenchwoman smiled. "I am glad you have told me this. Listen, *mon fils*," and she laid her hand on his arm; "this woman, I know the type right well. Fair, is she not, elegant, graceful—yes, and accomplished, as you say, a citizen of the world? All true, all granted. But, for her heart, my poor young man—my fly that would be caught in a silver web—look you, it would go into my Ethèle's little finger; there would still be room and to spare."

Erick could not help laughing at the comparison.

"I think you are about right there; but, then, do you not see—?"

"I see very well, *mon fils*," she interrupted. "Annette de Motteville was not born blind. Sharp eyes and a clear head are needful in the world. I tell you this—beware, for the good, great heart beats sometimes slowly, and the senses of the young are—what shall I say?—alive, awake. This is what you shall do: speak to Ethèle. Yes, or bid her adieu,—you see, *mon fils*, it is a necessity; your honour demands it,—and then you shall go away from us." She looked at him wistfully. "See, I sacrifice myself for your good. You shall go, not to this big London, for ever bubbling over with excitement, no room for quiet thought, but to Switzerland, Italy, the East. *Enfin, que sais-je?* You shall be *en voyage* for six long months; you shall see neither this fair siren, nor my Ethèle; you shall think of them both in the absence. And, do I not see the result? We shall have here a great rejoicing. But first, *mon fils*, justice."

He bowed his head over her hand.

"You are always right," he said; "I will do as you wish."

CHAPTER VII.

MISS GORDON AT WORK.

Deluded by a seeming excellence.

Mr. Crampton was sitting in his study. Mrs. Crampton, with a face anxious and troubled, it is true, but happier than of old, was busy about the house. The rain was pouring down in torrents; there was no chance of visitors; the clergyman, in dressing-gown and slippers, was making the most of the occasion, now slumbering, now diving into the columns of the *Times;* the clergyman's wife was turning out the cupboards in the dining-room, assisted by Martha, who, as usual, looked an embodiment of disapprobation.

But—it was late in the afternoon; they had begun to feel perfectly safe—the visitors' bell rang at last.

Wringing her dusty hands, and with a wild "Wait a moment, Martha!" Mrs. Crampton ran

upstairs. Martha, however, was equal to the emergency; as when was she not? She opened the door, and, seeing only an insignificant-looking person in a long grey waterproof, dripping with water, did not think of inviting her to enter.

"Mistress is engaged," was her curt answer to the usual inquiry. The lady smiled, and drew off her wet veil.

"Let me in, Martha," she said, in a clear, ringing voice. "I want to see your master."

The voice, as the speaker, no doubt, intended, penetrated to the study. It brought out Mr. Crampton, slippers, dressing-gown, paper, and all.

"Is that you, Eleanor?" he said. "Come in out of the rain. Here, Martha, take Miss Gordon's waterproof."

Martha obeyed, but very sullenly. "She did not care to serve the likes of her," she remarked downstairs, loud enough to be heard by her master, who knew his place too well to take any notice of her small impertinence. Ever since that evening in Dover, Mr. Crampton had been more or less under the dominion of his tall, ungainly housemaid.

The clergyman was a little curious about this strangely-timed visit. Miss Gordon had never been given to disturb herself unnecessarily, and Mrs. Clifford's carriages and horses were, as a general rule, at her disposal. What could have brought her out in the rain?

"Is anything wrong, my dear?" he asked.

"Nothing—with me, that is to say," she answered, fixing her eyes on his face.

"Is it with Mrs. Clifford? You cannot surely have been foolish enough to quarrel with her?"

"I *never* quarrel with my friends," replied Eleanor, smiling a little. "My dear Mr. Crampton, the fact is this, I am out on a couple of days' leave."

"Indeed!" and Mr. Crampton stroked his whiskers reflectively. "May I ask, now—"

But there was a strange look in her face, which stopped him suddenly.

"You have come to tell me something," he said, abruptly.

She did not seem to have heard his question. She was busy with the copy of the *Times* which lay on the table. Folding the paper so as to bring the advertisement sheet to the outside, she laid it before him. "Have you seen this?"

she asked; "it has been inserted two or three times."

Putting on his glasses, Mr. Crampton examined the paragraph in question.

"*To Managers of Theatres and Others.*—A French lady, residing in the country, has under her charge two young girls of unusual personal attractions. They have been educated with a view to the stage, and are anxious to obtain an engagement.—Address A. B. C., Post-Office, Maidstone."

He read it half-aloud, then looked up. "Well, Eleanor, and what of this?"

"Think, Mr. Crampton," she answered, impressively. "Have you *no* idea, *no* suspicion?"

"Suspicion—idea!" he muttered. "My dear girl, you are really very mysterious;" but, as he spoke, the hand which held the paper trembled.

Eleanor Gordon looked at him compassionately.

"I see how it is," she said, and her voice was softly caressing—herein, indeed, lay, in a measure, the secret of this woman's power. She could be anything, everything, according to the exigency of the moment. "Yes," she continued, "I understand *so* well. I knew

your high spirit, your tenderness of heart, and, to save you from the pain of unnecessary suspicion, I made the matter certain before coming to you."

"Then"—and Mr. Crampton, white to the very lips, clenched the paper in his hand.

"Hush!" she said, laying her hand on his arm, and looking up pleadingly. "You must first listen to me. Try to be calm. When you know all, your own fine judgment will guide you. But, to continue: I always felt, as you are well aware,"—Eleanor dropped her eyes, there came a sad look into her face,—"that *I* was, in a measure, responsible for your daughters' flight. Yes, dear Mr. Crampton, don't contradict me. Knowing your kindness of heart, I allowed myself to give way; I told you all my grievances; it would have been much better to have kept them to myself, or, at least, to have chosen a different time for speaking about them. This has been upon my conscience, oh! so heavily, during these last years, I could not shake it off. I have said to myself, in the dead of night, the children whom I love are perhaps suffering, are being brought up in evil; for, if you remember, I never believed that anything

had happened to Ethel and Blanche. Feeling as I did, you cannot wonder that my eyes were always open to the slightest sign which might possibly lead to their discovery. If you could only have known," she smiled softly, "the wild-goose chases I have had, here, there, everywhere! I never told you. I saw the sorrow had settled down upon your heart, that gradually you were finding resignation; I feared to awaken false hopes, to remind you of your sad loss. I think it must have been a week ago—yes, I remember, it was the night of our ball—that I first saw this advertisement. It struck me at once as peculiar. How it was, or why it was, I cannot possibly explain. I sometimes feel as if it had come to me by a kind of inspiration; but suddenly it flashed upon my mind that here might be a clue. I answered the advertisement, not in my own name, of course, nor in my own hand. I was requested to communicate with this address. Then, Mr. Crampton, I asked for these two days' leave. I went myself to the specified address, I made inquiries in the neighbourhood; *this* is what I heard. About two years ago—the time corresponded exactly—an old Frenchwoman had

taken up her residence in the neighbourhood. A gentleman had preceded her to make every arrangement for her comfort. The house had been furnished by him, without the slightest regard to expense; the upholstery, which came from Paris, made the simple villagers stare. The old woman had not been settled there a week before the gentleman returned with two young girls, supposed to be sisters, whom he placed under her care. The gentleman's name," Eleanor's voice faltered, "I have been unable to find out. Either it was unknown in the village, or else the people have been bribed to keep it secret. It all seemed very strange,—I trembled. Determining, however, to make matters sure, I watched the house. Mr. Crampton—have patience; my dear friend, bear up; all may yet be set right—my suspicions were only too well-founded. I saw an old woman, she looked like a retired actress; she was dressed up in a fantastic style; she was leaning on the arm of a tall girl. Time has changed Ethel, but—I could not fail to recognize your daughter; and, as if to make assurance doubly sure, even as I looked, peering through the trees that shut in the front garden, my darling little Blanche—

not changed, no, not in the slightest degree—bounded out of the house. How I refrained from rushing into the garden, from carrying away the dear little one, at least, out of all this contaminating influence,—how, through the blinding tears, I managed to find my way back,—I can scarcely say. But—here I am: I have found them! it is for you, their own father, to save them."

If a thunderbolt had fallen at Mr. Crampton's feet, he could scarcely, perhaps, have been so utterly confounded. He was a selfish man, but he was a father, and, in his own way, he had loved his girls. Their loss had been a heavy blow, though the action of time, and the growth of his younger children, had, in a measure, consoled him. Still, to hear of them, and in this way, to believe them in bad hands, seemed, for the moment, to bring back all his past horror.

Thomas Crampton looked an old man, old and helpless, as, leaning forward on the table, his head in his hands, he literally trembled at the tale which had been told him.

"*What* shall I do?" he asked, piteously.

She rose and grasped his arm. "Do, Mr.

Crampton! why, find them at once; rescue them; bring them back. The law is on your side; happily they are both under age."

"Yes," he cried, suddenly jumping up from his seat. "The law—ha! I will have the law of the villain who has robbed me of my children—of the wretches who would bring them out on the stage,—thinking, forsooth, that, as a clergyman, I would never find them there. Good heavens! Give me his name. I will find him out—I will—"

"You will do nothing of the kind, Mr. Crampton," said Eleanor, firmly. "Remember, you have your daughters to think of. They are young still; their absence from home may be explained. This that I have told you must be kept completely in the dark, if you wish to have them received in society."

The clergyman glared at her. "But—" he began, and then, beneath her calm gaze, his eyes sank.

"Eleanor, my dear," he said, "I am an old man, you are wise and right. My children! my poor children! I must find them."

CHAPTER VIII.

ETHEL'S DREAM BROKEN.

But go and tell our God from me
He must forgive what He hath given;
And if we be by passion driven
To love and all its natural madness,
Tell Him that man by love hath thriven,
And that by love he shall be shriven.

In the little house by the sea-side, in the mean time, matters had resumed their usual aspect. It was the morning following the day of Miss Gordon's disclosure.

Rather irritable and tiresome, Blanche, with a flushed face, was trying to decipher a new piece of music—always an arduous task to the volatile little girl. Ethel was by her side, helping her; Madame de Motteville sat in the room, a piece of knitting in her hand.

The old woman's face was as calm, as peaceful, as it had ever been. The storm had cleared away the clouds from the mental horizon; she

believed once more in her children, in their future,—in the great God who, as she often said, had always been present in the hour of her greatest need.

But if to Madame de Motteville a new peace had come, from her child and pupil all peace seemed to have departed. There was on Ethel's brow a restless, unsatisfied longing; dark lines were under her eyes; even her movements had lost some of the quiet grace which had come to her during the past months.

She seemed to carry on her usual tasks only with a painful effort. Once or twice, as Blanche struggled and fidgetted, as the wrong notes and false time, the repetitions and hesitations, flowed on, Ethel repressed with difficulty an impatient exclamation, and pressed her hand to her head. Madame had been watching her a little anxiously.

"*Mon enfant*," she said, at last, "do not deny it. This is too much for you to-day; and Signora, when she comes for the singing, will be vexed to find you weary. Go to your room, and rest a little while. I will superintend this practising."

Ethel did not answer. Somewhat to the sur-

prise both of Madame and Blanche, she took swift advantage of this permission. Turning suddenly, she rushed out of the room.

The fact was this. The poor girl had been longing to be alone. Once or twice that day it had seemed as if the rising in her throat would choke her,—as if she must break down and cry before them all, like a little child that has been crossed in its whim; and this she could not bear to do.

Released at last, she flew to her little room, and, after locking the door, threw herself on the bed. Then the storm came. If her old friend could have seen her she would have been seriously alarmed. Sob after sob burst from her heaving breast, the tears flowed in torrents; holding her head in both hands, the girl rocked herself to and fro in her misery, moaning, over and over, "What shall I do? what shall I do?"

The warm sunlight flooded her room; outside the leaves and blossoms were basking in its radiance.

Ethel felt no gladness, saw no beauty; her heart within her was heavy as lead.

And yet to that very little room, only a short

week before, she had retired with a beautiful new secret to hide away in her heart. Erick had asked her to be his wife. Ethel had vaguely expected something of the kind, and yet, when it came, it was like a shock. He had spoken very quietly, very seriously. She had trembled a little, for Erick had seemed unlike himself; but this had been clear enough. She was to belong to him; from that time forth she was to look upon herself as his.

For that afternoon, that night, sleepless in its glad excitement, this had been all Ethel could desire. Her heart had been so full of the music of her dream realized, her dearest hope fulfilled, that there had been no room for discord. But, slowly, painfully, a cold, dead something had intervened to chill her joy—to awake her true heart's questioning. First, Madame, who seemed not at all surprised at the glad news, who said earnestly, looking at her face, tremulous in its joy,—"*Ma fille*, it is well. Thank God with me. He has saved us from a life-long misery."

Then Erick's departure, unexplained to her, and for some indefinite time. "If he loved me," said Ethel to herself, "why should he go away?"

These facts had set her questioning. She went over the scene in the garden; she saw him again, as he had been then, so gentle in his manner, so quiet and serious. Where were the colour and glow, the anxious tremors, the passion of tenderness, that belong of right to youthful love? Ethel was young and inexperienced, but all these she had fancied, for their germ lay hidden in her own heart.

And the very gentleness of her would-be lover crushed her; there was in it, to her true perception, the element of self-abnegation.

As she thought, Ethel grew alarmed. Was he sacrificing himself to her? *This* was an idea too dreadful to be borne. "What shall I do?" she cried, for, in her unthinking impulse, she had promised, and he had gone. If she could only see him, if she could make him allow her to take back her word, and hold himself free once more. As it was, she could not even write; he had left no address, only a promise to let them know as soon as his plans should be a little settled.

Ethel thought of all this, as she sat there. She seemed tied hand and foot, bound down, —pledged to the acceptance of an unwilling

offering. And she was obliged to bear it all alone. Blanche was too young to understand: she could see beforehand the calm look of disapprobation with which Madame would receive any word betokening doubt or hesitation.

Madame de Motteville was a Frenchwoman of the old school; she could not understand how any young girl should allow her feelings to interfere, in such a matter, with her manifest interests. Ethel's feeling she would have called childish,—any indulgence in it weak and unworthy of herself and her position. The young man was independent,—he had neither father nor mother,—he was free to choose. He had chosen her, and the arrangement was, in every way, suitable. What more could be said?

Thus the poor girl was thrown upon her own mental resources. She felt out of harmony with herself, cut off absolutely from sympathy with her fellows.

"What shall I do? what shall I do?" The words seemed to repeat themselves, to echo in her brain, to be drawn out into long mournful cadences. And still no solution to the question would come. It seemed as if Fate were against

her,—as if she were destined to be mistaken—humiliated.

For the first time in those two years Ethel wished for her father. She belonged to him, she had a right to his protection. She might, indeed, find him out; she might leave the shelter Erick had provided; she might return to the old life; and even that seemed a paradise of rest when compared with this — with the misery of her humiliation, with the bitter sense of dependence.

But—for to break the tie altogether would have been comparatively easy—there spoke another voice within her, and this was even harder to answer. To leave Madame de Motteville would be to leave Erick altogether and for ever,—to break the word she had pledged so solemnly under the light of those evening skies.

How happy it had made her to speak that word! How the loveliness of the purple sea and golden clouds had grown and intensified, as the dream of her true heart seemed to blend itself with their beauty! How, all night long, the music of her life's new song had made a sweet melody of its own in her heart—a melody

so sweet, so engrossing, that she had felt almost sick with its joy! Of all this Ethel thought now with a shiver; for reality had touched her magic castle, and beneath the iron hand its silvery fabric had fallen.

Ethel was eminently unselfish. Her love comprehended this, a passion for the happiness of the loved. She had always loved Erick. Even in those days of what seemed to her the long ago, when, with that instinctive sense of foreboding which comes sometimes to a girl-child, she had striven against her fate, she had thought to hate him, even then this feeling had been strong in her soul. And it had grown with her growth, it had strengthened with her strength, till now, the wisdom and knowledge of eighteen years upon her head, Ethel gave herself unreservedly to the impulse which bore her along. She loved Erick—dangerous position for a woman!—far more than he loved her. *His* affection partook of selfishness,—was grounded, indeed, on the kind of necessity he felt for her companionship, her gentle, womanly influence. *Her* affection was absolutely unmixed by any such alloy. To be with him, indeed, was a kind of rapture; to sit in his presence,

very silent herself, but watching the play of his features,—to anticipate his wishes, to hang on his words,—was bliss to Ethel. Unfortunately, in her girlish enthusiasm, she let this appear. And now, in the fever of her own heart, she read the coldness of his—in his gentle solemnity her heart saw sadness.

"I am to blame, I only," cried the girl. "By my folly I have bound myself to him; his generosity accepts the burden, but—my darling is miserable, in his nobility he suffers, and I have done it—I, who would have given myself to save him. Oh! God, what shall I do? If I might only die!"

The sobs had ceased. By the violence of her emotion she had spent herself. She sat on the bed, tearless, motionless, her large grey eyes fixed on vacancy. As this thought came to her, she fell on her knees.

"I should be out of his way then," she murmured; "I should make no more dreadful mistakes."

And the prayer came—one of those mad cries, to which we humbly trust the ear of a loving Father may be deaf, or—for He knoweth

all things—that He may lend them His own merciful interpretation.

"Let me die!" cried Ethel, her hands clasped, her eyes swimming once more in tears. "Oh! God, let me die!"

Outside there was a sudden disturbance—the rattle of wheels, the drawing up of a vehicle, followed by a heavy tread on the gravel, the sound of a loud, impatient voice.

Ethel rose hastily to her feet. We would be done with the world, the world draws us back to herself, mother-earth, who cannot do without her children, who would drown their cries of anguish in her ceaseless tumult, the rushing to and fro of her worshippers. Shaking off her tears, Ethel peered out curiously. She was just too late; the visitor had passed under the porch, but his voice rang through the silent house.

"You are in the plot, I make no doubt of it, old woman; but, I tell you what it is, I'll get a policeman; I'll have you all up; I'll demand a search-warrant."

Barbe was evidently trying to withstand the stranger, who was forcing an entrance.

"*Mais Monsieur*," Ethel could hear her say, "you seem not to understand. Wait only —I will avert Madame. But—but—" there was the sound of a scuffle; Barbe had strong shoulders and sinewy arms. "Things are not so done in this house. I cannot indeed permit. This way, then, *mon beau Monsieur*."

The man's voice rose. "Let me alone, you old harridan. Avert, indeed—gain time—send them away to some infernal hole. I'm no fool, I tell you. I'll—"

The sound of his voice had penetrated to the school-room, which was situated at the other end of the house. It had brought Madame upon the scene, and a lull followed.

But Ethel, silent and motionless in the middle of her little room, her cheek flushed, her eyes dilating, was trying to collect her thoughts. That voice—it was familiar—where had she heard it before? She tried to remember, and then it came upon her with a sudden throb, half of gladness, half of terror. The voice she heard was her father's. Her fate was to be taken out of her own hands; another was to decide it for her.

It might have been an hour, it was really

not more than a minute, that Ethel stood there thinking, but, in that minute, a whole cycle of thought swept over her mind. Father—father—it is a blessed word, or, rather, perhaps, blessed is the idea it represents. This the girl felt like a cool river, flowing through her fevered brain. In it, at this moment, seemed rest, healing, peace. She saw her father, not as on that last day, when his face had been red with passion, when his hand was lifted to strike, but as she had seen him in her childhood, when he had held her on his knees, had borne her in his arms. Then, and again, as in these last years, sorrowful, despairing, seeking his children, and finding them not. Was it not love that had brought him, love that had rendered his footstep rapid, his voice harsh?

Ethel's eyes filled with tears of penitence and love. Instinctively she consulted the mirror. There were traces on her face of the severe mental agitation through which she had passed.

"This will never do," murmured the girl. She plunged her face into cold spring water, smoothed back her hair, arranged her collar and ribbons; then, trembling with excitement, opened the door of her room.

Madame's voice was ringing through the house, quavering and weak, "*Ethèle, Ethèle; où est-elle donc?*" There came from the drawing-room the murmur of conversation. Ethel stopped and pressed her hand over her heart to still its beating; so many feelings were contending there for the mastery, she felt as if those throbs would choke her.

"Ethèle, Ethèle." The old woman wished to speak to the girl before she and her father could meet. She saw her on the stairs, and started back in amazement. Ethel's eyes were gleaming; her face was flushed; she held her head erect.

"*Mon enfant,*" cried the old woman. The girl did not hear. She passed her by, and opened the door of the drawing-room.

Shaking her head, Madame de Motteville went to her own little room, shut the door, and knelt down before the crucifix.

"I would have averted the misery," she said. "Again, it may be, I have erred. The good God be gracious to my children."

CHAPTER IX.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

Ah! love, but a day,
  And the world has changed!
The sun 's away,
  And the bird 's estranged;
The wind has dropped,
  And the sky 's deranged;
Summer has stopped.

Mr. Crampton's indignation had been partially allayed. Madame de Motteville's calm face and quiet dignity could never fail to impress. In spite of himself, he treated the old woman with respect.

As Barbe retired, he explained his errand quietly, but ready, if resistance should be offered, to open out his ammunition of wrath.

There was no need. His words carried conviction. Turning from the clergyman, Madame de Motteville summoned Blanche.

The little one had always been her father's

favourite. To her he had never been ungentle. With the sight of her fair young face, a tide of memories swept over the man. He felt his fatherhood.

Giving way to the first impulse of tenderness, he put out his arms, and drew her to his embrace, "Blanche, Blanche, why did you leave your father? But it was not your fault. Poor child! Poor child!" And Blanche, who was always gentle and compassionate, reading the sorrow in her father's face, nestled down beside him, her soft, golden head upon his shoulder.

"Papa, dear," she murmured, "you won't let Miss Gordon be unkind to Ethel again?"

To the child the two years were like a dream. She was ready to go back at once to the point from which they had started. But it belonged to Blanche's nature to array even blame in gentle words. It was not insincerity, though sometimes her gentleness was accused of being wanting in truth. It was simply her character. She could no more bear to give than to receive pain. For the events that led to their flight she would not blame her father, though she knew he had been wrong. Ethel had said it was Miss Gordon's fault. Instinctively she

eased her loving heart by accepting the governess as a scape-goat for him.

But the clergyman's brow contracted, he was at his best. Blanche's was the power of gentle people.

"Yes," he said, softly, "I was wrong. I allowed a stranger—" And then, feeling suddenly that he was confessing to his little daughter, his child, to whom he ought to have been the model of all excellence, he broke suddenly short, and, resuming his dictatorial manner, "Tell me, Blanche, what have they been doing with you here? That old lady there,—a foreigner, I presume, from her appearance and accent,—has she ever been an actress?"

"An actress, papa?" Blanche opened her blue eyes in astonishment. "I don't understand."

The clergyman frowned. "I greatly fear you have been already taught deception, Blanche. How is it that you can pretend not to understand me, when—"

Blanche's face expressed most unfeigned wonder; but before she could answer, before her father's sentence could be finished, the door opened.

Blanche jumped up eagerly. Mr. Crampton adjusted his eye-glass. The little controversy with Blanche had restored him to himself; he was in his own element once more. Still, for the womanly form, for that statuesque beauty, which distinguished his eldest daughter, the swan-like bend of the neck, the depth of the thoughtful eye,—for these Mr. Crampton was totally unprepared. Ethel had left him an unformed girl; he found her again a woman, even unusually developed for her age.

His eye-glass dropped; he started back for a moment; but he recovered himself speedily. In spite of the change in form, the face was that of the daughter who had left him, and he felt angry for having been betrayed into showing what might be looked upon as weakness before her.

"Well, Miss Ethel!" he said, in a hard, bantering voice. "You are certainly a pretty young lady! One may hope that, tired at last of living on strangers, you will return willingly to your father's protection."

And poor Ethel, who had been flushing and trembling,—who had built, from the ruins of her old dream, a new one, not so resplendent, it is true, but fair and beautiful in its way,—felt

her heart sink heavy as lead into her bosom. But this time she neither trembled nor wept. She looked up to the common-place form she had been idealizing in her simple heart.

"You have found us," she said, quietly. "It is right that you should dispose of us."

Her quietness irritated Mr. Crampton. Tears would have softened him; but these he had checked effectually. The girl stood before him, proud, and, to all appearance, feelingless. Once more he failed to understand his daughter; once more the barrier between them that, in this moment, one loving word might have struck down was cemented firm as adamant, black as the rock whose foundation is in the deathless sea.

"*You* are not changed for the better," said the clergyman, angrily. "I can see that at a glance, my grand young lady. It will be necessary, forsooth, to speak to you in chosen language. I had hoped to find you penitent, ashamed of your folly, ready to confess everything."

He was sitting still, looking at her through his eye-glasses. She was standing before him, —firmly, poor child, to all appearance; but, in her heart, oh! how sick and faint, how ready

to sink! For this seemed worse than all. It brought back the old life and its crushing grievances, its daily carping annoyances, with such force as to drown altogether that other picture which her loving heart had conjured up.

She had thought, in her father's sudden arrival, to find a solution to her difficulty. As she looked, from her stately height, on the man who was her father, as she noted the little twinkling eyes, the ponderous jaw, the self-satisfied smile, the girl said within herself, "*He* would only make matters worse. He shall never know."

Looking back quietly, she said—it was slowly and with effort, but every word seemed to carry weight—"I am ashamed of nothing, papa; nor have I anything to confess."

He started from his seat and caught her by the arm. A faint smile curled her lips.

"It is of no use, papa; nothing you can do shall make me tell what I have vowed to keep to myself."

With a muttered exclamation, Mr. Crampton turned away. In his daughter's calm eyes he read his own weakness, and, for the moment, he hated her. But the clergyman was, above

all things, a prudent man. It was for his own interests to keep on good terms with Ethel.

"Come, my dear," he said, hastily, putting out his hand, "enough of this. You must allow I have had cause to be displeased with you. We had better, perhaps, put off our explanation until we are both cooler. You see," and he laughed a little awkwardly, "it is so difficult to look upon you as a woman, Ethel, and, if my memory serve,—dear me, how time *does* run away to be sure,—you must be past eighteen."

"I was eighteen in March," said Ethel. She had taken her father's offered hand; she had looked into his face strangely, he thought. Indeed, the look made him rather uncomfortable. But she said nothing, only turned away to the door with a step that was weary and languid.

"Where are you going, my dear?" cried her father.

"To find Blanche," she replied, for, in the interval, the thoughtful little girl had slipped away to Madame, to console her for their almost certain departure.

"Quite right," said the clergyman; "and, Ethel, you may as well put your things together. We shall start by the evening mail.

Doubtless, if your explanations turn out unsatisfactory, I shall seek this Frenchwoman again; and this you may tell her, if you like; for the present, my only desire is to get out of the place with you both as quickly as possible. And, Ethel,"—for she had scarcely waited to hear the end of his sentence. "How very impatient you are, my dear! Tell them to send me a glass of wine and a sandwich."

Ethel gave Barbe the message; then went, for the last time, as her throbbing heart testified, to the little blue-room, where so many girlish confidences had been given, so many loving counsels received. Blanche and Madame were there together. The old Frenchwoman's eyes were full of tears.

"*Ma mère*," said Ethel, kneeling down beside her. "Bless me; I must leave you." Her voice was choked.

"And Erick?" whispered Madame.

Ethel looked at Blanche. From some instinctive feeling, she had kept the news of her engagement from her sister.

"*Petite*," said Madame, "will you go tell Barbe? Let her put your things together."

When they were alone, Ethel put down her

head,—the poor head for which no one seemed to care,—on her old friend's lap.'

"*Ma mère*," she said, drawing off from her finger the little ring of ruby and diamond, which had been given in memory of that promise. "We must go away; and, for Erick, will you—will you,"—her voice faltered,—"write, dear Madame; say he is free;—send this back?"

"But, *mon enfant*," the old woman looked distressed, "this should not be."

"Yes, yes, dear, dear Madame," and at last the girl broke down, began to weep like a vexed child. "He does not love me," she said, through her tears, "and then there is my father. *Ma mère*, you will grant my *last*, *last* wish. If I knew where my—I mean, where—Erick is, I would not ask you." Sitting up, she tossed back the hair from her face. "*Ma mère*, what shall I do?" she cried, at last; "I think life is very hard."

Tears were in the old Frenchwoman's eyes.

"*Pauvrette*," she said, in her soft, silvery tongue. "The lot is hard, ah! I know it. But, listen—understand. It is beautiful—is it not?—to think of a father: rest to the weary

heart and aching brain? There is a Father, even for thee, my poor hunted child. Ethèle, look up. In the heaven of heavens, far, how far! from all these storms and tumults, these beatings of poor hearts, and weepings of weary eyes, is the Fatherhood we need.

CHAPTER X.

GOOD GENIUS.

Pure spirits are of Heaven, all heavenly.

They went away—in the hush of the fair evening, the murmuring of soft breezes around them, the warm breath of summer, of quiet growth, of calm development on every side; and, as they sat together in the little hired carriage, which was to take them to the nearest station, Blanche's blue eyes filled with tears, Ethel felt as if her heart would break. Her veil was over her face, which looked pale and wan. She did not wish to speak, to be noticed in any way; only to think, only to look out on all she was leaving behind her, only to forget for a moment what was before, to think of the quiet, peaceful days she was leaving for ever. Storms had preceded them, storms were already shutting out their beauty; but they had been fair and pleasant.

For the moment of parting, the past sweetness, only enhanced the present bitterness. In the days that were to come, Ethel might be thankful for their beauty and rest, because in their peace had been a time for growth and preparation.

In the light of happy days, hedged in with affection, girt about with care, the girl had put on a gentler, calmer womanhood.

Ethel, in the midst of the fretting cares of her own home, followed by her step-mother's sharp but anxious glances, the influence of her father's mammon-worship on her soul, might have been very different. For the gracious curves of her form, the soft tones of her voice, the calm dignity of her manner, she had to thank Madame de Motteville, and that unconscious tendency to imitation which does so much to form and fashion the young. But, on the evening of her final departure from her girlhood's home, Ethel thought little of this. Her heart was in one indescribable tumult of wretchedness. She was leaving behind her a place endeared by a thousand tender recollections; she had said "Good-bye," for ever, it might be, to her old friend; she had given up, thrown from her, injudi-

ciously, perhaps, all claim to Erick's protection. And, in return, what had she gained? Ethel, in all probability, did not put the question to herself, so circumstantially; but, now and then, withdrawing her eyes from the passing scenes, so fair, so familiar — here had been picnics with Erick, there was the little bathing-place —they fell, almost involuntarily, upon her father, the arbiter of their destinies.

His anxiety over, Mr. Crampton had become fussy. He was fuming about the inconvenience of this absence from home, wondering if they would be in time to catch the train, and if Mrs. Crampton would have supper ready, to all which the good-natured little Blanche, seeing Ethel's incapacity, answered as well as she could.

Ethel watched her father, and the great yearning in her heart died down. She clasped her hands tightly together.

"I have been foolish," said Ethel, within herself. "Would to God I had rushed away, hidden myself, done anything rather than this."

They had reached the station happily in time to catch the train; they were seated in a

first-class carriage. Wringing her hands in the silence of that night—Blanche was sleeping by her side, the stentorian breathing of her father announced that he, too, was at rest—Ethel bewailed her fate.

"I think I must be wicked," she said, "that all these things come to me!" And then came the woman's cry,—"What shall I do? What shall I do? How can I bear it all?"

Night had come. Looking up, the girl saw the sky, deep, fathomless in its depths, studded with stars, pin-points of radiance, set in an immeasurable distance of height. Laying her head against the cushions, she looked up—up, until the weight of the measureless seemed to crush her. It came upon her, as once before in her girlhood, that sense of the infinite which is so terrible to some minds.

Again she moaned, in her agony, "No end, no end." This time no voice of gentle wisdom answered her, and the girl shivered and shrank within herself. "For ever, for ever," the words rang through her ears. "For ever to be herself, for ever to bear the burden of living. It cannot be," cried the girl. "And yet,"—she clasped her head in her hands, the painful,

awful thinking made it ache and throb; but, do what she would, the thinking went on still. "And yet I may die; it would be for ever; a for ever there is, whatever may happen to me."

The pale drops of agony stood on her brow. "I cannot bear this, I cannot bear it."

Unconsciously, in the absorption of thought, the girl had spoken the last words half-aloud. So deep was the silence, that her own voice startled her. She looked round hastily. Her father could not have heard her. His head was against the pillows, his mouth was half-open, his eyes were closed; he was not certainly a pleasing object; but, near him—Ethel started back. Had she been thinking aloud, and, if so, how much had she said, how far had she revealed herself? A small face, white as ivory, pale hair, that had caught a brightness from the yellow lamp-light, blue eyes, startling in their depth of colour, lit up now with a sudden earnestness—this was what Ethel saw,—an apparition, as it were, facing her in the carriage. The girl had thought they were alone in the compartment. If at this moment an angel had appeared to answer her, she could scarcely have been more bewildered.

Before she could have time to recover herself, the white spirit-like face was near her own, a voice clear as a child's, tender as a woman's, was murmuring in her ear—only a few words, and words so simple; but, strange to say, they struck at the very heart of the misery,—"Our Father, which art in Heaven."

The girl drew back her breath with a sigh—in Heaven, in the midst of the awful mystery—*a* Father—*our* Father.

Instinctively, Ethel clutched the small hand that was resting on her arm. "Is it true? Is it true?" she gasped.

And the silvery voice replied,—"It is—I know it."

Like cool water to the thirsty traveller wandering in a dreary desert, drought on every side of him, the accents fell.

The blue, calm eyes of the pale, yellow-haired child or woman,—Ethel, for the moment, did not know which to think her,—and the grey eyes of this young girl, for whom already life's mysteries had shown themselves so hard, met, and there flowed from one to the other a sympathy which was akin to love, which, of itself, brought comfort.

"Thank you," said Ethel, simply. "Perhaps, some day, I shall know it too; but just now—" And then she recollected, suddenly, that she was talking to a total stranger, and drew back into her corner.

There came a sad look into the blue eyes. They filled with tears.

"I understand," said the voice, very softly, "for I have felt it too. Things go all wrong, and we can find no way of putting them straight, and people do wrong, and we can say nothing. *It* is true for all that."

Ethel was leaning forward in the carriage again. She put out her burning hands, with a sudden cry, low, but intense.

"Yes, yes, but how can it help us? What shall we do?"

Very low was the voice, very clear, yet it seemed to come from the heart of her who spoke,—

"Our duty, only our duty, and the rest will come in His time. If not here—there."

CHAPTER XI.

ETHEL SECRET, THE CONGREGATION AGHAST.

Doth the cloud perish, when the beams are fled
Which steeped its skirts in gold? or dark and lone,
Doth it not thro' the paths of night unknown,
On outspread wings of its own wind upborne,
Pour rain upon the earth?

It is well to be young, to live in the bright, too short, morning of life. Storms may come and go, mists and storms may hang about it, but utter darkness, the blackness of despair, cannot be within its magic circle. Beyond the clouds are the lofty azure, and the strong, pure light of the upper skies.

Through the rents and fissures in the cloud-shadows we see them from time to time, and strange and sad would be the morning which gave us no glimpse of the stillness that for ever overlies our tumult.

Ethel and Blanche were both in the radiant

time. With them life was strong, hope was vigorous.

What wonder that the younger began soon to be happy in her new life, that the elder found herself settling down much sooner than she could possibly have expected?

The home to which their father brought them was certainly not very attractive in itself. For the measureless sea, and the garden, with its soft turf and lichened walls, they exchanged a dusty, suburban thoroughfare,—a commonplace house, neither large nor small, of the semi-detached villa species, and a long garden, wherein nothing seemed to be able to grow.

But Mrs. Crampton's anxious face warmed at the sight of the girls. She seemed really glad and thankful to see them return to their father's house, and some of the children had grown into a more interesting age. Besides, the two girls had one another, and Ethel, in the solitariness of her heart, had begun to confide in her young sister.

The girl had another source of comfort. She was trying to do her duty, to be forbearing to her father, kind and gentle to her step-mother,

to take the position of an elder sister with the younger members of the family. And this, of itself, was good for her.

Mr. Crampton had a certain kind of popularity in the neighbourhood. As in Dover, so here, in this suburban district, there were not a few who interested themselves deeply in himself and his family.

The story of his lost daughters had been well known to his ardent admirers. Many had been the sympathizing heads which were shaken, and the warm advices that were given, for the clergyman had not ceased to make capital out of his misfortunes. With a jocund face and a broken heart he went about the world. The female members of his congregation — who, by-the-bye, were far more numerous than the male—believed in the heart, and disbelieved in the face.

Of course the story of the recovery of the lost darlings flew like wild-fire over the parish. All sorts of strange interpretations were given to the girls' long absence by the friends of the family, and all were grounded on the best authority.

But Martha shut up her lips tightly when

questioned on the subject; Mr. Crampton, fully believing that he had rescued his daughters from a life of infamy, would say nothing, even to his wife, who, truth to tell, was bubbling over with curiosity; and Ethel, having fully determined that her short engagement to Erick, and his part in their life at Madame de Motteville's, should remain for ever a secret from her father, was not only silent herself about the history of those two years, but warned Blanche to the closest secrecy.

The younger sister, as has been seen, was accustomed, in all things, to follow the lead of the elder. No one had ever possessed so much power over Blanche's mind. For her it was enough that Ethel wished her to say nothing; that to disobey Ethel's wish would be to call that sad look into her face which always perplexed and grieved the little girl. Happy herself, Blanche liked every one about her to be happy, and chiefly Ethel, for she was nearest to her, nearest to her heart, and nearest to her life.

And so great was the firmness of the elder, the simplicity of the younger, that, in spite of efforts innumerable made by all kinds of

persons, from Mr. Crampton, who threatened terrors innumerable, but carried none of his threats into execution, down to the little daughters of some of his lady friends, instigated by their mothers to make artless inquiries of the girls, this part of the lives of Ethel and Blanche remained a blank.

Ethel's conduct may seem unnatural in a girl of eighteen, but it was grounded on strong motives. She had a fear that, should the truth be known, Erick would be blamed by the world, or, worse still, that her father would hold him to his promise. And this, to the sensitive girl, would have been death. It was hard to resist,—harder, perhaps, to her than to Blanche, for there was a softness about the little one that inspired compassion. The most earnest searcher after the truth in this matter, so inscrutable to the gossip-mongers of the congregation, refrained, instinctively, from forcing the wild little fairy into any painful confession. But Ethel stood her ground firmly. Of the evening of their flight, of that night in the steamer, of the manner in which they had gained the shelter of Madame de Motteville's house, she would never speak.

And thus it came about that Ethel Crampton, a girl eighteen years of age, was ushered into the society of her father's house with this ban upon her name. There had been in her life two years—important years, the mothers of the congregation said, shaking ominous heads—of which she could, or would, give no account.

Still, mammas and daughters were curious, papas and brothers were admirative. Ethel and Blanche had their fair share of attention from the moneyed aristocracy of this suburban district.

Blanche was asked to children's parties; she was too simple, said the wise mammas, to have imbibed much evil from the life she had led, whatever might be the case with her sister. Ethel, more distinguished, appeared now and then, hanging on her father's arm, at dinners and evening parties.

Mr. Crampton prided himself on being a man of taste. After that first interview, after he had made up his mind that his daughter's will, on this one point, was unconquerable,—and it is noticeable that the men of many words and a vast amount of bluster are

weakest in will and endurance,—Mr. Crampton treated his eldest daughter with a certain amount of deference.

He admired her. There was, in her manner and appearance, a distinction which pleased his taste and gratified his vanity. He liked to dress her well, and to appear among his friends with this stately girl upon his arm. Even her way of repelling curiosity delighted him. He would watch her about a room, with a pleasant smile on his face and an eye-glass in his right eye, caressing his whiskers thoughtfully. He began, in fact, fully to persuade himself that the girl's grace of manner was due to his own efficient training.

"Look at that girl," he said, upon one of these occasions, to a submissive little ally,—he went by the name of Mr. Crampton's satellite, being generally seen in his company, and was the happy possessor of half a score or so of flaxen-haired, watery-eyed darlings,—"look at that girl! A match for any of them!" Then, button-holing the flattered listener,—"Tell you what it is, my dear Simpkins, it is training,—nothing else, upon my word. A few years ago—bless *me*, if you could have seen that

girl!" Then, improving the occasion, as was his wont,—"Do what I advise you. Make up your mind. A fine fellow like you *ought* not to allow himself to be guided by his wife. I have the deepest respect, the warmest admiration, for Mrs. Simpkins; but—judgment in all things, my friend—ladies are wanting in decision and promptitude. Take the matter into your own hands. Send those two pretty girls of yours to Miss Spencer's. You see—between ourselves, not a word of this to my friend Mrs. Simpkins, she would never forgive me—they want style, polish."

Miss Spencer's diamond-ring, a family heir-loom of some value, was glittering at the moment on Mr. Crampton's little finger. Miss Spencer had a few more precious heir-looms in her possession, but this Mr. Simpkins could not be supposed to know.

Turning from his kind adviser, he watched for a few moments Miss Crampton's graceful movements, and his heart throbbed painfully.

Two of the Misses Simpkins, red-armed and awkward, were giggling in a corner of the room.

Acting with that promptitude and decision which, according to Mr. Crampton, should always characterize a family-man, their father sought them. Stooping over the elder, he whispered angrily,—"You gaping idiots! Why have *you* no manner like other girls? But I have made up my mind at last. You shall go to Miss Spencer's to-morrow. Do you hear? Perhaps she will improve you."

The girls looked up imploringly, but their father was inexorable. From giggling they passed into vacancy. For them the pleasure of that evening was over.

In the retirement of his own home, Mr. Simpkins was foolish enough to detail to his fair partner some of the reasons which had led to his hastily-formed determination.

Mrs. Simpkins, jealous and indignant, repeated the facts to her daughters and two or three sympathizing matrons, who had begun to find Mr. Crampton too much of a power in their households.

"*That* man *has* hardihood," was the universal cry. And the lips of old and young shut tightly over clenched teeth. Bad sign this in the feminine world.

"To boast about *that* girl," said Mrs. Simpkins.

"Why, mamma," cried Miss Ada, the second daughter, "*I* think Ethel Crampton *perfectly lovely*."

"Come here and kiss me, you innocent darling," replied her mother, looking round with a significant nod. "Lovely is that lovely does," she continued. "Really," in a low voice to a neighbour, "it is quite dreadful to think that a girl should come among us about whom no one knows anything. She may have been— Good gracious! one's hair stands on end! I shall consider it a duty to my husband and children to find out more about this."

Said the neighbour, smoothing out her ruffled flounces, on which the youngest hope of the Simpkins' had been crawling,—

"And I, too, have daughters, dear Mrs. Simpkins, though, happily, under the circumstances, too young, you see, to— Still, if you *do* succeed in finding out anything—"

"I shall *most* certainly allow it to be known as widely as possible."

Mrs. Simpkins threw up her head and pursed

in her lips. That the result of investigation would be unfavourable to the Cramptons she could not doubt.

"Pride must have a fall," said one of the matrons, sententiously. And therewith, for the moment, the matter dropped.

That it was only "for the moment," any one who knows the world will be well aware.

CHAPTER XII.

THE YOUNG GIRL AND THE WOMAN OF THE WORLD.

> To hear an open slander is a curse;
> But not to find an answer is a worse.

Miss Gordon's situation, glittering as it might appear in some of its adjuncts, was yet by no means a sinecure. After that short leave of absence, painfully extracted from her patroness, her duties grew more arduous.

The weather was sultry, and Mrs. Clifford was languid and fretful; she would scarcely allow her dear Eleanor out of her sight. It was Eleanor who ordered the luncheons, little miracles of delicate and varied cookery; Eleanor who adjusted the sofa-cushions for her afternoon nap; Eleanor who suggested some little amusement to diversify the monotony of her existence; finally, when Mr. Clifford came

home from the City, "so cross and upsetting," as his wife would plaintively remark, it was Eleanor who coaxed him into good humour by her pleasant smiles, and soothed his after-dinner slumbers by her warbled melodies.

"Never you marry, my dear," the little City-man would say, patronizingly, "and I tell you what it is, you shall be the heiress to all my wealth. Made it myself, every penny of it—have a right, if anybody has, to dispose of it as I like."

And, smiling sweetly, Eleanor would answer, "I cannot tell how it is,—I think I must surely be different from other girls,—getting married never seems to enter my head. Perhaps," looking thoughtful, "it is because I have *such* a happy home here. Other young girls situated as I am—" and her soft eyes would fill with tears, thus cutting short her sentence.

The result of which eloquence would generally be the gift of a £20 or £50 note.

"Gratitude ain't so plentiful," the little City-man would say to his wife; "and upon my solemn word and honour, to hear her talk makes a fellow feel a trifle soft."

All this was very pleasant to Eleanor, also very

profitable,—indeed, she was getting together quite a store of crisp, white bank-notes; still none the less was her life a little dreary at times. More dreary certainly than it had been, for even luxury, in time, palls upon the senses; besides, she wanted leisure to further and ripen her own schemes. If, for a few short hours, that scene in the conservatory had burned out of Erick's mind the recollection of his boyhood's dream, to Eleanor it had been an awakening, a great revelation, in whose vivid light all other flames showed faint and dim.

As day after day passed by, as neither word nor token came to notify that it meant anything, that ever again should its sweetness be renewed, her heart sank within her. To sadness would succeed a bitter anger.

"He thinks he has done with me, poor fool! he thinks he can amuse himself, play with me, as he has played with others!" thought this woman, whose schemes had never yet failed utterly.

And then, changing suddenly,—"My darling, my darling, if you only knew how much I love you! Love me, and I will give up all—I will be good, like pale-faced, saintly little Gertrude,

whom every one seems to like. Pah! how can they?"

For Eleanor Gordon had been captivated, —she was as far gone as any love-sick little girl.

And, in the mean time, all her plans were at a stand-still. Erick had gone, no one knew whither; this she had ascertained from a servant in Madame de Motteville's house, whom she had constituted her spy. It was possible, indeed, that she might be able to draw something out of Ethel; but since she had heard from the grateful clergyman of his daughters' safe surrender to his parental care, she had not been able to leave Mrs. Clifford even for an hour.

Eleanor grew fretted and pallid in her effort to devise some means for obtaining a short respite. She was sitting alone in her room one evening, when an idea came. Acting upon it at once, she wrote a short note, which was despatched the next morning.

It was answered, in the afternoon, by the arrival of Mrs. Clifford's niece.

Gertrude did not like Eleanor. She felt keenly the something that was antagonistic

in their natures. With the clear insight of a child-like simplicity, this girl often saw through designs that blinded much cleverer people than herself. Instinctively, she had always distrusted her aunt's favourite.

Still Gertrude Clifford, ready even to err on the side of charity, struck her colours instantly at her enemy's signal of distress.

Eleanor wrote confidentially that she was suffering, that the dear aunt was just a little trying, that she felt as if she must either have a few hours' rest or else give way altogether; would Gertrude take her place for an afternoon? And Gertrude did not hesitate.

"Poor girl!" she said, showing the letter to her father, "I have often thought her life monotonous. I must certainly go there, and see what I can do to help her."

"But the concert, my dear child; you wanted so much to hear this quintet, and it will not be again performed this season," urged her father. "You are really too self-denying, my Gertrude," he continued; "and Miss Gordon's behaviour to you at your aunt's ball—"

Gertrude flushed. One of her girl-friends had overheard the explanation given by Miss

Gordon to Mr. Græme of her conduct. It had cut Gertrude to the very soul.

"It is better not to think of it, dear father," she said, with an effort to speak calmly. "It made me feel a little resentful, and as—as—Well, resentment is not a pleasant feeling, and ought to be conquered, not cherished; so don't you see, I rather rejoice in the opportunity."

"*You* cherish resentment, Gertrude!" said her father, and then he kissed her on the brow. "My beautiful child, take your own sweet will, I know it is always right."

Gertrude was shown into the drawing-room; her aunt was in the boudoir, taking her afternoon nap; but Eleanor came fluttering in, with open arms.

"This is, indeed, good of you," she said. "Really, Gertrude, you are the dearest little creature in the world. If we were all like you—"

But Gertrude, detaching herself from the warm embrace, broke short the string of compliments.

"I was glad," she said, quietly, "to have the opportunity of serving you in any way. Shall I go to aunt Ellen's room?"

"Immediately, dear; but I want to speak to

you first. Dear Mrs. Clifford is not *very* well just now; she feels the heat so much." Eleanor was looking very pale herself; she pressed her hand to her head. "I think I can't be well either. I know I am safe with you, dear Gertrude, and not for the world would I even appear ungrateful to my dearest, kindest friends. You see, the fact is, that the strain on me is just a little more than I can bear. Mrs. Clifford cannot move without me; but she is fond of you,—you can always manage to amuse her. I want you to suggest—as if it came from yourself, you know—that you would drive with her in the afternoon, and dine here in the evening. I will excuse myself on the plea of a headache —not much of a plea, by-the-bye. Do put your hand on my temples."

"Poor girl!" said Gertrude, soothingly, and forgetting her grievances against Eleanor, in her ready compassion,—"I am *so* sorry for you."

Which simple sentence made the blue eyes of the companion flash, but she only said, in her dulcet tones,—"Thank you, dearest. Sympathy is always sweet, yours is especially so; but, listen, that is your aunt's bell. She is awake, and wanting me."

Twining her arm lovingly into Gertrude's, Eleanor led the way to Mrs. Clifford's boudoir, and the matter was arranged by the exercise of a very little diplomacy. Languidly the lady consented to everything. Eleanor had *carte blanche* to stay away as long as she liked.

An hour brought Miss Gordon to Mr. Crampton's door. She had come to see Miss Crampton, and Miss Crampton was at home, sitting alone, in the dingy little room they called the school-room. She was singing, running up and down the scales, practising elaborately-turned exercises. Her clear, full voice rang through the house. With her hand on the door-handle, Miss Gordon listened. The sounds were anything but pleasant to her.

The poor companion, her twenty-seven years upon her shoulders, her uncertain fate oppressing her, her unripe projects seething in her restless, aching brain, hated the fresh young girl. She would have deprived Ethel of every talent, robbed her of every grace; she would have made her, once more, the lanky, awkward school-girl, afraid of herself, shrinking and timorous, when wrought upon by external influence.

And Miss Gordon was far-sighted. That one glimpse in the cottage-garden had told her the truth. It was now no unformed school-girl with whom she had to deal, but a woman of unusual power and attraction.

For one moment she stood there, her face darkened with passion. It was only for a moment. Miss Gordon had unlimited power over her facial muscles. The frown passed into a beaming smile, as she threw the door open, and ran forward impulsively into the room. "Ethel, my dear, dear child! how long I have been looking forward to this!" she cried, holding out both her hands.

But Ethel drew back. The apparition was so sudden. Her father had instinctively refrained from mentioning Miss Gordon's name in her presence; and, since the day of their parting, so many changes had come into Ethel's life, that the memory of the time when Miss Gordon had been her constant companion had waxed dim. Yet the girl had an instinctive consciousness of the presence of something hostile. There came into her face a look of distress and perplexity.

"I *should* know you," she said slowly; "and yet—"

Does the bird, when it is held by the magic power of a serpent's glittering eye,—a power which no putting forth of strength, no fluttering of weary wings, can withstand,—feel pain or pleasure? I think it must be a little of both. It is fascinated, and yet repelled; its power of volition is gone, and yet it longs to be free.

Something like this Ethel felt that day. She could be repellent when she chose. The calm dignity of her manner had called forth, more than once, the unwilling admiration of her associates; but this time the dignity was gone.

The large grey eyes, which had been luminous with the light of pleasant dreams, with the gladness of conscious power, as her grand voice had risen and fallen, in the ebb and flow of the waves of sound, fell suddenly beneath the cold blue-steel gaze of the woman who had come—Ethel did not know, but she felt it—to be once more a power in her fate,—to disturb the dream, that was rising again in fair proportions, from what had seemed a hopeless

ruin,—to bring a fresh discord into the life she was struggling to render harmonious.

"Ah! I thought you must remember presently," said Miss Gordon, in her softest tones; and Ethel—constrained again, by an unaccountable impulse, to look up—wondered if she had fancied that cold sinister look, for now the eyes were soft and gleaming, the face was aglow with loving smiles.

"I think I must be dreaming," said Ethel plaintively, pressing her hand to her head.

"Yes, indeed," replied Eleanor, with a light laugh, "it seems like a dream, Ethel, to see you again, and to see you as you are." She looked at the girl with unfeigned admiration. "Don't blush, my dear. If your father is only moderately prudent, you will take society by storm. But, come, you have not asked me to sit down yet. For once in a way, I happen to be my own mistress for a few hours, so, with your permission, I mean to throw off my bonnet, take a seat on this queer little sofa, and enjoy a long gossip with the dear recovered daughter. Oh! my dear," and she burst into an immoderate peal of laughter, "if you could only have heard your father giving his descrip-

tion of the matter to Mrs. Clifford the other day. It was as good as a play. And the poor woman, afraid all the time he would go into hysterics, plying him with the best port in her cellar. But, Ethel, my quiet child, where is your tongue?"

Certainly the young girl was very different from her ordinary self. With Miss Gordon's voice, her bantering manner, her scornful laugh, all the awkwardness of Ethel's childhood seemed to return. Quiescent herself, she allowed her visitor to dispose of bonnet and jacket; she did not even invite her to take a seat, but sat watching, as if a kind of fascination possessed her.

"I feel a little bewildered," she said, in answer to the last appeal; "you see, papa never mentioned your name."

"Not!" replied the companion, raising her eyebrows; "ungrateful man! when he owes the very discovery of you to me."

Ethel started, and flushed painfully.

"To *you!* What can you mean."

"Exactly what I say, my dear. But," she continued, with one of those light laughs, which grated so painfully on Ethel's ear, "you

will be curious to know how it came to *my* ears. I think I must let you guess. It was *such* a pleasant surprise. My mind had been racked with anxiety, for it would have been sad indeed if a little foolish girl, running away from richly-deserved punishment,"—and Miss Gordon's eyes looked, as she spoke, as if to re-inflict that punishment would have given her keen pleasure,—"had come to some untimely end. I had determined to find you; but, at last, had given up the search in despair. How well he hid you, *cara!* Well! men are no match for women,—never have been, never will be. You are a little girl yet, but this you will learn some day. I had always had a kind of suspicion. Miss Brook made a very false move when she gave your father that confused account about her nephew. It set me on the track."

Ethel had been turning first pale, then red, in her misery, as the light words flowed on. Her secret, her cherished secret, that she had hidden, as she thought, that was known to no living creature but herself and Blanche, here it was, blazoned forth in the light of day, meeting her on the lips of the last person in

the world to whom she would have trusted it.

She buried her face in her hands; she was too wretched even for tears; but the last words made her start up indignantly.

"Miss Brook! what had she to do with it?"

"Nothing, I can well believe. It would scarcely do for a middle-aged woman, with any claim to respectability, to sanction such an arrangement. Brother and sister!" Miss Gordon laughed scornfully. "Excuse me, my dear, this Arcadian simplicity is really *too* deliciously romantic. But what was I saying? Oh! yes,—about Miss Brook; she suspected something of this kind, and her suspicion, do you see, awakened mine. I determined to find out more. It took me a long, long time. Had it not been for that impulsive little letter of yours—Ethel, my dear, you look very pale—shall I whisper the name of my informant? Poor helpless boy! He was no match for me. It was a pretty little conversation. We were alone, your beautiful Erick and I, in Mrs. Clifford's conservatory,—I shall point you out the very spot some day,—dusky shadow, a transparent semi-darkness, flowers and frag-

rance, diamonds and glitter,—the kind of thing, you know—or rather you *don't* know, my poor child, so sweetly innocent—to take a young man's senses by storm."

The voice was very charming. It flowed on softly and evenly, as if the narration were the pleasantest thing in the world for the listener; but every word inflicted its sting, every movement of the speaker was a fresh torture to the young girl, whose most sacred feelings were being torn from the shelter of her beating heart to be cruelly analyzed.

And, at last, Ethel could bear it no longer. The storm in her soul passed from the prudent bondage of her will. Rising suddenly, she towered, stern and stately, over her oppressor.

"Be silent!" she cried, passionately. "I will hear no more of your base calumnies. How dare you come here to insult me, in my father's house?—to pretend you know—"

"Pretend! Ethel!" Again, beneath Miss Gordon's fixed gaze, fell the grey eyes, which, for one moment, had flashed back proud defiance.

Ethel sank back helplessly. "Why do you torment me so?" she said, in a faint voice.

But there was no relenting in the hard, ringing tones that answered.

"My dear, *do* understand me. To torment you is furthest from my thoughts at the present moment. On the contrary, I wish to be your friend. You will need one, let me tell you, Ethel, for your position is anomalous. I knew you would not voluntarily confide in me, and, therefore, I wished to let you know at once how very deep I am in your secrets. Now, my dear little girl, do, pray, be sensible. Learn wisdom of your elders. You are a simple, innocent baby, or you never could have allowed a certain person, who shall be nameless, if you like, to run away in this ungallant manner. *I* happen to know that he felt his obligations. A little time ago you might have made him do anything. You see, my dear, I want to teach you a little, —to indoctrinate you with that world's wisdom which, in your position, will be very specially necessary, if you mean to hold your own in society."

Cried Ethel, her eyes flashing again, and her breast heaving, with the earnest effort to be calm, "*Will* you be silent? Will you leave me? I tell you your wisdom is hateful to me.

I have nothing to conceal, no fears for the future; all I ask is to be let alone."

"And in this," replied Miss Gordon, with one of her peculiar smiles, "you show your own simple folly. Nothing to conceal!" She looked at the girl fixedly. "What about your engagement, Ethel? When last I saw you—yes, my dear, I know what I am saying, you did not see me upon that occasion—there was a ring upon this finger. How it glittered through the trees! and how the glitter— Tush! what am I saying? My simple little school-girl, you shall have, if you like, all the diamonds of Golconda glittering about you; but this one little ring—well, I happen to take a peculiar interest in it—where have you hidden it away, Ethel? and what has become of your lover? Take my advice—the advice of a friend—hold him fast to his promise, or tell your father, and he will help you. Young men are ticklish subjects, and I know the young man in question. Erick is specially volatile, my dear. No, no, you shall not go. I have more to say to you."

For Ethel had risen to leave the room. Her cheeks were on flame, her lips were quivering,

she felt as if the solid ground would give way under her feet. When the cold, firm, white hand—how cruel it looked to the young girl! —was laid on her shoulder, she sank down, weak and helpless as a child.

But even in the midst of her own misery this girl was self-forgetful. The passion of her life was with her. What Miss Gordon had to do with Erick, what was her motive for the infliction of all this torture, she could not even vaguely imagine; but the woman's instinct cried loudly in her soul. Whatever her own lot might be, she would defend the man she loved. In her life of miserable mistakes and failures *he* should have no part.

"I am *not* engaged," she cried, almost fiercely. "Who dares to say that I am? I know nothing of—of—"

The last word was inaudible, for Ethel's face was covered. She would have hidden her burning shame beneath the very earth, for cruelly, with keen and pitiless severity, had her true position been forced upon her that day.

But Eleanor. Prudent and worldly-wise as she was, the poor companion could contain herself no longer. She had heard all she wished

to know. Erick was free,—bound in no way to Ethel.

Her eyes flashed,—there went through her spirit a tremor of joyous exultation,—she could scarcely refrain from singing aloud in her rapture.

The wily had conquered the strong; for the strength of Ethel's affection, the truth and refinement of her nature, had made her weakness.

If she could have known all the suffering to herself and others that would arise from that hasty avowal! But she could not. She acted for the best. Woman-like, she was led astray by her lofty devotion to another, her girlish depreciation of herself.

CHAPTER XIII.

BLANCHE'S CONSOLATIONS.

Night brings out stars as sorrow shows us truth.

Miss Gordon spent the rest of that day with the Cramptons. The clergyman was always glad to have a chat with this lively denizen of the great world on whose skirts he hung so perseveringly; and Mrs. Crampton, now that she had ceased to see in the fair enchantress any rival in her husband's confidence and affection, was quite ready to be condescending and gracious to their visitor.

Eleanor Gordon was amiable. She would sit with Mrs. Crampton by the hour, entering into minute details about the latest fashions, the modes of hair-dressing, the elaborate toilettes, she had seen at the numerous balls and receptions to which she had accompanied her patroness. For Eleanor was frequently asked out. Her good address, her pleasant manners,

her adaptability to every society, made her a general favourite.

To hear of all these things was very pleasant to Mrs. Crampton; and Eleanor, who could be good-natured when it suited her purpose, indulged the little woman gladly.

On this occasion, therefore, when the little party sat down together to the family tea, Blanche's intimation that Ethel had a bad headache, and would remain in her room, caused little comment.

"Girls have tenacious memories," said Mr. Crampton, sententiously, from behind his paper; and Miss Gordon, smiling sweetly, continued her conversation with Mrs. Crampton. "Flounces up to the waist, yes, a little long in the front, and looped up with flowers; colours, of course, to suit the complexion and general toilette. A very good effect. I saw several at Lady G.'s ball the other night."

"On young girls? My dear Blanche, why don't you take your seat?"

Mrs. Crampton's voice was a little fretful. She did not like these conversations to be interrupted.

"I want a cup of tea for Ethel," said Blanche,

"and rather strong, for her head seems very bad."

"Very well, my dear. Martha shall take it up directly. Did you say young girls, Miss Gordon?" and again Mrs. Crampton turned an interested face to their visitor.

"Please *I* want to take up the tea," said Blanche, "and at once. Ethel is really ill, mamma."

"You are very troublesome, Blanche; it seems to me that, in this family—"

"Pour out the tea; pour out the tea," said Mr. Crampton, "and don't jangle." Then, putting down his paper, "Eleanor, my dear, does your friend Mr. Clifford take an interest in politics?"

"Thomas, I will *not* have it," broke in the aggrieved wife. "Miss Gordon was in the middle of telling me about Lady G.'s ball. *Always* politics?"

The clergyman laughed. "Dress will keep, my dear, and you have your duties to perform. Don't you see that we are all waiting on your leisure? Which way," turning to Miss Gordon, "is Mr. Clifford likely to give his votes?"

With a sigh of disappointment, Mrs. Cramp-

ton bent her head over the tea-tray. The conversation had ebbed away from her cherished subject, in spite of her strenuous efforts.

But Blanche's perseverance was rewarded. She was given a cup of strong tea to take up to her sister. When, at last, poor Ethel had managed to escape from her tormentor and hide her misery in her own room, she had thrown herself on her bed, exhausted, but tearless, feeling very miserable and strangely weak. She was trying to collect her thoughts. What was all this that she had heard, or was it only fancy?

Did Erick know Miss Gordon? Had he talked with her, made her his *confidante?* Had he perhaps—the girl shivered—to *her* bewailed his misery, in being bound by his honour to an unsought fate? Something like this the cruel voice had suggested.

For a moment the girl exulted. "I am glad, *so* glad, I did it," she said to herself; "now, by *my* act, he is free." And then, the full import of this freedom dawning on her mind, she pressed both hands against her temples. "Free!—yes, he is free; and I, never to see him again—never, never! Through all the ages our lives

to flow apart!"—and the cry of the tortured heart came from her parched lips.

"If I might only see him once—once; look in his face,—know if he has been true."

The girl's hands and head were burning. Every pulse in her body seemed throbbing to a wild music of its own. There was a miserable aching in her limbs, a painful discord in her brain.

"I wish she had let me alone," cried Ethel, starting up and pacing the room. "I wish I had been out. I wish Blanche—"

The door opened. In a light muslin dress, her long hair bound back with a broad ribbon of blue, her Leghorn hat swinging in her hand, Blanche appeared upon the threshold. She looked so fair and child-like, so very far removed, in her simplicity, from all this tumult and fever, that the elder sister—not so distant in point of age, but, oh! how far, in experience of a woman's life—caught back her breath, with a sob of passionate regret.

Blanche gazed at her in astonishment. "Did you call me, dear? I thought I heard your voice." And then, going up to her, she put her arms round her neck. "Darling, something

has happened. Are you ill? Lie down on the bed. Poor Ethel. I am *so* sorry."

And all at once Ethel broke down. The gentle touch unlocked the sealed fountain, relieved the burdened heart. Throwing her arms round her young sister's neck, she wept, as she had not wept since the day when the long train of mistakes and miseries had begun. The tears did her good; they seemed to ease her heart, to lighten the pressure on her brain.

It was after this, after her sister had grown calmer, and she had persuaded her to rest on the bed, Blanche made that request of her step-mother, which had the effect of turning the conversation from the great feminine topic which the little woman, in her dutiful seclusion, always delighted to honour.

Blanche and Ethel were not generally much affected by the wrangling that was the ordinary accompaniment to their meals at home; but, on this special occasion, her father's pompous tones, and her step-mother's sharp complaining voice, seemed particularly discordant to Blanche.

"I shall not go down again," she said, when

she had persuaded Ethel to drink a little of the tea; "they are all squabbling."

"Ask Martha, then, to bring up your tea here," said Ethel.

The grim housemaid had a tender spot in her heart. She was always eager to serve Miss Blanche. The young girl tripped off with her request, and, in the course of a few minutes, a delicate little meal was served on the table, beside Ethel's bed.

They made a pretty picture, or at least so Martha thought, taking a backward glance from the door of the room, after she had arranged everything to the young ladies' satisfaction. The curtained bed, and, on it, warmed by the red tinge of evening-light, the young girl, in her white wrapper, her flushed face, cushioned on one full arm, the other resting lightly on the fair head, bent at the moment, with great apparent earnestness, over a miniature tea-pot. A pretty picture, and suggestive. Of coolness and rest, it seemed to speak; of home and safety. And thus, on the morrow of a storm, may ocean smile; the dead things, barely cold, tossed hither and thither on her heart, a ghastly ruin of timbers and cordage, that, but yesterday,

was a stately ship, bearing hundreds to their home, lying, high and dry, on the fatal rock, within sight of the weltering sunlight, the tender innocent wavelets.

As Blanche chattered and ate, and forced little dainties on her sister, a smile glimmered over the sadness of Ethel's face, and Blanche, sympathetic, clapped her hands. "You are ever so much better, dear." She *was* better; but the storm had been. The scathing tempest had swept the girl's heart, and the dead things were tossing about there with such a desolate aching.

In the night, when Blanche's voice was silent, when all the world seemed still, it came over Ethel all at once. Rising, she paced the room. In the morning it might be better; then a glimmer of something bright might dawn upon her; now all was a black darkness,—dead hopes that had been, oh! so fair, so bounteous,—dead faith, and almost, not quite, the deepest misery of all—dead love. For Ethel was yet true to the loving worship of her soul. The child who, long ago, had passionately refused to believe evil could be, in a lovely pictured face, had grown into the woman, clinging tenaciously to her ideal of beauty and good.

"It is not *his* fault," she cried that night, kneeling beside her bed, with hands clasped and eyes staring out into the darkness. "Not *his* fault, oh, God! but *mine*. I have wronged him by my folly. Oh, save him! keep him!"

The words were sobbed out in the darkness, almost unconsciously, for the girl felt that a danger was about him—a danger she could not avert, save in this way, by invoking a stronger Arm to his defence. And the feeling calmed her.

Prayer is a woman's one resource. She may be forced to hide away the dear name in her heart, to be nothing in the life of the loved, to see him on the road to destruction, and hold out no helping hand; for the world, her own shrinking heart, and untoward circumstances, may all be in league against her. Of this, at least, no power can deprive her. Strong in her weakness, she may raise her voice in faithful prayer; and although not always may the strong crying be heard,—for the human asks as the human, with the dimness of humanity on her vision,—yet has the crying a result, in relief to the weary heart, that, self-contained, might wither in its inaction.

CHAPTER XIV.

ETHEL ILL—MRS. SIMPKINS'S COMMENTS.

> As an autumnal blossom
> Which spreads its shrunk leaves in the sunny air,
> After cold showers, like rainbows woven there,
> Thus in her lips and cheeks the vital spirit
> Mantled, and in her eyes, an atmosphere
> Of health and hope; and sorrow languished near it,
> And fear, and all that dark despondence doth inherit.

ETHEL had gone through much suffering before the interview with Miss Gordon, which had seemed to crown her misery.

Her mind worked upon her body. On the day following that sleepless night she was in a high fever. Mrs. Crampton, very much alarmed, —for her own, as she called her children, to distinguish them from her step-daughters, were delicate, and prone to infection,—sent at once for a doctor.

The doctor set their minds at rest about infection, but recommended for his patient

extreme quiet, and an absence of all exciting topics. These injunctions were strictly carried out.

Mrs. Crampton had always been great in a sick-room, but what he could mean by exciting topics puzzled her not a little.

For three weeks Ethel was kept in a darkened room, Blanche and Mrs. Crampton the only two people who were suffered to approach her. During part of that time her mind wandered, and even Blanche, who thought she knew all her sister's secrets, was sorely perplexed with her strange utterances.

Miss Gordon and Erick talking together in some beautiful place, all flowers and scents, seemed to be chiefly in her mind. She would hold up her hand and listen, then repeat snatches of some fancied conversation, commenting upon it wildly. Now she would push out strongly with both hands, a look of horror in her face, crying imploringly, "Why do you let her come to me?"—and then, again, she would sink back upon her pillows, muttering feebly, "She is too strong for me, too strong!"

It went about the parish that Ethel was ill,

and many were the inquiries that were made, the thoughtful gifts that were sent.

The bell seemed alive, Martha said, grimly; but, nevertheless, she enjoyed the importance of answering inquiries, and allowing various details to be drawn from her.

For those members of the congregation who had vainly been trying to find out the mystery that hung about the Misses Crampton's antecedents were pleased to see some addition to the mystery in this sudden illness.

"It isn't scarlet fever and it isn't measles," said Mrs. Simpkins to her neighbour; "and two days before, at that party, you know, she looked the picture of health. Girls of that age," she continued, confidentially, "don't fall into dangerous fevers in this promiscuous kind of way; and Martha did let out to my cook that the doctor gave it as his opinion that the mind had more to do with it than the body."

"You can't surely mean to say so?" said the neighbour, deeply interested; and, at the appearance of interest, Mrs. Simpkins warmed.

"*I* ought to know girls' constitutions at my time of day; and I tell you what, it isn't likely

she'd fall ill so distressingly sudden; go off her head, rave—"

"*Did* she go off her head?" asked the neighbour.

This was a salient point, not to be lightly passed over.

"Go off her head? Good gracious, my dear! She's been downright mad, they say; had to be held down in bed by main force. Talk running altogether on some young man. Depend upon it, there's a dark story there. And Mr. Crampton knows more than we give him credit for."

The neighbour, who was a little nervous, shivered. "Makes me feel queer all over, Mrs. Simpkins. But how *can* Mr. Crampton, a minister of the gospel, you know—?"

What Mr. Crampton ought or ought not to have done, was left to the imagination, for Mrs. Simpkins only nodded, in vigorous approbation of the sentiment.

"*She* did not profess," as she often said, loudly, "to have any admiration for the man."

The fact was, Mr. Crampton had an unpleasant habit of working upon the weak mind of Mrs. Simpkins's lord, and hitherto Mrs.

Simpkins's lord had been ruled by his better half with a rod of iron.

From her hand the rod was passing. The clergyman was becoming a power in her house; and this galled the woman's soul.

The neighbour added on to Mrs. Simpkins's statement, and, by degrees, poor Ethel's illness, the result purely of over-wrought nerves, grew into alarming importance. That it had been preceded by an interview with the man who had stolen her from her father's house many years before to bring her up to the stage; that Mr. Crampton had hurled him downstairs; that Ethel, who had fallen deeply in love with him, had heard the sound of the scuffle, and fainted from fright; that, ever since, she had lain between life and death, only now and then opening her lips to mention his name; that Mr. Crampton was at his wits' ends; that Blanche had lost all her colour, and was going about like a ghost; that Mrs. Crampton had refused, on principle, to go into the sick-room, or have anything to do with her step-daughter; that Mr. Crampton intended to send his daughter away as soon as ever she could be moved, being afraid of a repetition of scenes of the kind, and

of her influence on the minds of his younger children,—these rumours, with many more of a like character, went circling about the parish. And all the time Ethel, in her forced seclusion, was gradually returning to a new life.

She had a strong constitution. Aided by skilful nursing and perfect quiet, it struggled successfully with the fever. Before a fortnight had passed, her devoted nurses, Mrs. Crampton and Blanche, had the satisfaction of seeing their patient begin once more to take an interest in life and its concerns.

The fever left Ethel very weak. At first, when her brain became clear enough to understand what was passing around her, there had been a kind of weariness in the girl's face. The world to which Ethel opened her eyes seemed painfully devoid of beauty and interest.

"Blanche," she said, on one of those days: it was in the evening, the room was half-dark, the girl's face looked wan, like a pale star struggling alone with the darkness,—"Blanche, dear, *why* do you all take such care of me? *Is* it worth one's while to live at all?"

And Blanche replied, turning a rosy face and a pair of dancing blue eyes to her sister,—

nothing checked this young girl's joyousness, and she was glad now, because the doctor had said Ethel was much better,—"You are weak, Ethel, darling, or you wouldn't say such foolish things; of course it 's worth one's while to live."

"But why, Blanche, why?" asked the other, a little querulously.

"Because—oh! Ethel, what's the use of asking such foolish questions?—because—"

"You see, dear," said the elder sister, languidly, "the foolish question is too hard to answer."

"No, Ethel, no; because I can't answer all at once, you shouldn't say the question is too hard."

"There are so many things," said Ethel, meditatively, "that we think we know—quite well—perfectly; but, suddenly, we meet them face to face, and find out that we know nothing whatever about them."

Her face began to work painfully, the thoughts were too strong for her weakness.

"You are talking too much, Ethel. I shall be scolded," said Blanche. "Now lie down again, like a darling. See. Put your face into these flowers," and she brought to the bed-side a great bouquet of choice exotics.

But, instead of touching them, of breathing their sweetness, Ethel shrank back as if she had been stung.

"Take them away, Blanche. They have been making me mad all these days."

"Making you mad all these days, Ethel! when they only arrived this afternoon while you were asleep?"

And, putting down the flowers, Blanche looked earnestly at her sister. Was the fever still in her blood? But Ethel's face had no flush. It was calm and pale.

"There were other flowers here?" she asked.

"Yes, it was so kind of Miss Gordon; she brought some for you every day, and, several times, Mrs. Clifford came with her to ask after you."

Throwing out her hand, Ethel pushed off the flowers from the little table with a certain force. There was a faint smell of hothouse perfume, the delicate petals were scattered on the floor.

"Oh! Ethel, how can you?" cried Blanche, to whom flowers were almost like living beings. "You have hurt the flowers,"—and she picked them up tenderly. "Poor, dear, little beauties!"

"I am sorry for them," said Ethel, with a

faint smile; but the girl was choking back her tears. She felt so weak, and this enemy was near, was persuasive, was strong. She would win them all over, even Blanche, to think as she did,—to despise her, the poor, foolish being, who had given an unsought love.

"Take them away, Blanche, take them away," she said, hastily; "and please, please, bring no more."

"As you like, dear," replied the girl, in some surprise. She looked upon this as one of the caprices of illness, and began once more to feel a little anxious.

But Ethel had no relapse. In spite of Miss Gordon and her heavily-perfumed flowers, in spite of her own weakness, and the dead aspect of life, she grew better every day.

For youth *is* youth, and, in its pleasant season, the springs of life are strong. Let us thank God that it is so, else were some of life's choicest blossoms untimely shed.

CHAPTER XV.

MISS GORDON CONFIDENTIAL, MR. CLIFFORD SYMPATHETIC.

Vice oft is hid in Virtue's fair disguise,
And in her borrowed form escapes inquiring eyes.

"You don't surely mean to say so?" Mrs. Clifford, with her dear young friend, Miss Gordon, was sitting in her long, handsome drawing-room. The face of the elder lady was moved from its habitual languor, it expressed strong curiosity. The paper she had been reading had dropped from her hand; she bent forward over the little reading-table. "Are you *quite* sure of this?" she asked.

"I can scarcely be mistaken, seeing that I was the person who made the discovery."

"But, my dear Eleanor, don't you think you might have—that is to say—I should have been interested, you know, in hearing at the time; so many people have been talking."

"Forgive me, dear Mrs. Clifford. I should have confided in you, knowing, as I ought to do, your great discretion. Still—" And she paused.

Mr. Clifford, who had been dozing on the sofa, awoke suddenly to interest. He always liked the sound of Eleanor's voice.

"Go on, my dear," he said, encouragingly. Apparently the girl had lost consciousness of any presence but her own. Her eyes were dreamy, she was looking far away, into one of the dark corners of the spacious room. Turning, she continued, in a voice low and sweet, like the murmuring of a forest-stream,—

"Long ago, Ethel Crampton—poor child! she was *only* a child then, sixteen years of age —committed a great wrong against me. It is unfair to recall it, although now, and every day, I feel its consequences. I might have been, at this moment, a happy wife. I am—ah! it is to your kindness I owe it, that I am not a poor starving wretch, for, after the one great failure, I could not take up again the life of a governess. I forgive her from my heart, though sometimes it is hard to forget. Still, you will understand me, this feeling, however slight, of resentment, which, I know, must be

fought down, has made me specially careful to do nothing which may serve to injure the girl's reputation. Poor Ethel was always headstrong, and very strange in her ideas. I hoped that time had changed her, being fully determined on this point, that if I should find her penitent for her faults, and anxious to do right in the future, my lips, even to you, my dear friends, should be for ever closed about her past. I went to Mr. Crampton's—it must be two or three weeks ago now—I saw the poor girl, and spoke to her—" Eleanor paused again. An observant on-looker would have said that her face expressed keen regret, that the words came from her with difficulty. But Mrs. Clifford was not observant, only intensely curious. She had been listening with parched lips and eager eyes.

"You spoke to her; well, Eleanor, why do you stop?"

"Give the girl time, my dear," said the City-man, more considerate than his wife; "she don't wish to say anything she may have to be sorry for."

Eleanor held out her hand, with a smile.

"How correctly you judge me, Mr. Clifford,"

and the little man plumed himself at once on his keenness of perception. "Yes; it is just this that makes me pause. You have taken an interest in this poor girl, Mrs. Clifford has asked her to her house, and called frequently to inquire after her. It is right that you should hear this,—understand, you know, with whom you have to deal."

"But, my dear, what did she say?" Mrs. Clifford was becoming impatient.

"It's not so much what she *said*, as what she did *not* say," replied Eleanor. "I questioned her about that beautifully furnished house, of which I told you just now, and about the old Frenchwoman, whom we have proved to have been a beggar, picked up starving in the Paris streets—a decayed actress, I believe. This I had from the French servant who waits on her. I asked her about the constant visitor, who, it appears, came and went in the house as he pleased. Would you believe it, the girl would tell me *nothing*? She laughed in my face, spurned my offers of friendship, and, finally, used most injurious words when I reproved her for her duplicity, and threatened to make the whole affair public. Now, dear Mrs.

Clifford, *you* shall judge. I do *wish* to act rightly, to be moved in no way by personal feeling. Knowing all this, should I be right in allowing her to become intimate with my friends, they, all the time, ignorant of her true character? Why, I believe the girl is dangerous."

Mrs. Clifford gave a little shiver,—the thing was becoming serious.

"As long as she was ill," continued Eleanor, softly, "I was silent, as you know. That the state of her mind had something to do with that illness, I cannot doubt. Had it ended fatally, I should have felt grieved, indeed, to have said or done anything which could have cast a stain upon her memory. She is so young, poor girl! But I hear she is better, almost well. She will appear amongst us again, and as far as you, my best friends, are concerned, it must be in her true colours. I owe a duty to you,—I should be very wrong in keeping longer silence. Tell me, please tell me, I feel so bewildered sometimes,"—Eleanor's blue eyes filled with tears, she turned from one of her auditors to the other, with an appealing smile, —"have I done right in this?"

"Right! of course you have," replied Mrs.

Clifford, who, having whetted her appetite, was keen for further gossip. "But, my dear, did she—?"

"Ask her no more questions, at present, Ellen," said her husband. He cleared his throat, and walked to the other end of the room. The City-man, the skilful financier, keen and far-sighted where monetary transactions were concerned, was, in his home-circle, easily moved. "That girl has the temper of an angel," he muttered; then, returning to her, "Keep up a good heart, my dear," he said, cordially. "There are as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it, and for this girl, if you like, she shall never come near the place."

But Eleanor interrupted him. "Thank you, a thousand times," she said, with a faint smile. "But here, indeed, you mistake me. I am afraid I must have failed to explain myself thoroughly. I should be more than pained to shut the doors of any house against poor, dear Ethel. Let her come and welcome, as far as I am concerned. I only wished you to know what I know in the matter, which, after all, is little, that you might be on your guard, you understand. For anything further, my story

is told, forget it if you can. At least, do not let it weigh with you against my poor little pupil. Judge of her for yourselves."

Mrs. Clifford, whose very few thoughts ran in a practical channel,—she was not even endowed with so much sentiment as was possessed by the little City-man, her most worthy and respectable husband,—said in answer, plaintively sighing,—

"Then the invitation, Eleanor, which we were talking over before dinner?"

"Let it be sent, by all means. Ethel is a fine, handsome girl,—accomplished, and all that kind of thing. She will be an ornament to your room."

"I suppose we may look upon the matter, then, as decided? *Do* fetch me a bottle of smelling-salts, my dear. These things upset me."

And Mrs. Clifford, quite exhausted by the energy she had displayed in her reception of this choice bit of gossip, leant back among her cushions, while Mr. Clifford became clamorous for a song.

Eleanor satisfied the requirements of husband and wife. She adjusted the cushions for

Mrs. Clifford's weary back, grown quite stiff in the daily effort to bestow itself with comfort and dignity, and, this great task accomplished, she warbled song after song to the appreciative ear of the rich City-man, who, as the warbled melodies flowed softly on, lay back in his chair, the money-article of the *Times* before his eyes, but his mind wandering perversely to other times and other scenes. His eyes were half-closed, a smile was on his lips, he looked the picture of pleased enjoyment. Was this the dapper little man, starched and severe, whom his clerks, though they pretended sometimes to ridicule him, really feared, as well they might, for a very small fault could bring about a summary dismissal? Was this the man whom his business connexions knew, the man of clear brain and iron nerve, whose glance could kill deception at its birth, who made it his boast that he was never taken in? Clerks and business connexions would certainly have failed to recognize him. But so it is. Our life is dual. In the world one thing, in the home another.

The man who thought in figures, whom the world had wrought upon with its hardening influences, was, when the reins were loose upon

his neck, more easily imposed upon than any child. He believed in his wife's *protégée;* his natural kindness of heart was moved by the idea of her friendlessness, while her grace and womanly accomplishments charmed him.

"You are looking pale, my dear," he said that evening, as, rather earlier than usual, she proffered her good-night. "I see how it is. This has upset you. Ellen, my dear—" turning to his wife.

But Ellen was plunged in a deep slumber.

"*Please* don't disturb Mrs. Clifford," said Eleanor, gently. "And never mind my looks; I shall be stronger when the warm weather is over."

"I tell you what it is," said the City-man, looking at her fixedly, "I'll take a holiday."

He paused a moment.

"Yes?" said Eleanor, interrogatively.

"Yes, my dear,"—he brought down his hand on her shoulder,—"we'll take you abroad —show you Paris. You've not seen Paris? No? That's well. Paradise for ladies, they say; and the Alps. Come now, what do you say to that?"

Miss Gordon's eyes glistened. She had

heard from her informant at Madame de Motteville's that Erick had gone abroad. Abroad is a wide word; but the haunts of English travellers are not so very many. Her heart gave a great bound.

"I should like it of all things," she said, "only,"—and she looked towards the recumbent figure on the sofa.

"I see you would," said the good-natured little City-man, "All right; we'll manage to get her consent, once this party's over, you know. Deuce take the parties, *I* say. However, in all these matters I let ladies take their own way. Good-night, my dear; good-night. Sleep well, and dream about Paris."

Eleanor did dream when she went to her room; but the dream was a waking one. She sat on her bed, her hands clasped, her eyes glistening. "I have succeeded so far," she murmured; "surely, surely it is an earnest for the rest."

Never before had Eleanor been timorous. Her belief in her own powers was, as a general rule, unlimited; but this time so much was at stake. Her eyes filled. "Erick, Erick, I will find you yet."

There was a feeble knock at the door of her room. Eleanor jumped up, white and scared. She had spoken the last words aloud; could they have been overheard? And while she hesitated, the knock was repeated, louder this time.

Very cautiously she went to the door. Mrs. Clifford's maid was waiting there.

"I thought you must be asleep, Miss," she said, in a whisper; "and I wanted special to see you alone."

"What is it, Turner?"

"I may be doing wrong, Miss, but the young woman was *that* persevering, assured me it was of the highest importance. She wished to see you herself; but, you being with master and missus, busy with the music, I thought it better—"

"For goodness' sake, tell me what this means," said Eleanor. She threw a shawl round her shoulders, for she was shivering a little.

The woman held a small white packet in her hand.

"Give it to me," said the girl.

"As far as I can make out, it 's another name

that 's on it," and the woman fixed her eyes on the trembling girl.

"My good Turner," said Eleanor, softly, "I know about as much of this as you; but, like a dear creature, employ yourself in clearing out my wardrobe there, and putting aside some of the rubbish, to carry away to-morrow, while I try to find out the meaning of this."

"She says you 're to look special at the address," whispered the woman, as she glided past the bed.

Eleanor looked, and, after she had looked, she looked again; her head began to throb, her hands to burn and tremble. The woman was busy, in soft cat-like movements, at the further end of the room; she could feel, though she could not see, that she was being watched; the lamp burned dim, flickered, and Eleanor paused, shivering.

She had ventured much in her short life, for hers had been the exigencies of the needy, and want is a hard task-master; but here, now, for the first time in her life, she paused. There was something weird in the business.

In clear tremulous lines the words on the little sealed packet traced themselves out

before her eyes—an answer to her thought; but how had it come? Her brain, usually so clear, was in a whirl of confusion. The yellow flame was flickering to its end. Somehow, the seals were broken, there was a dull thud, the flying open of a hidden spring, a red gleam into the yellow light.

With eyes dilating, and parted lips, Eleanor Gordon gazed,—she could not even dare to stoop and find out what the redness meant.

There was a soft foot-fall behind her, a cold hand touched her neck;—she started back with a stifled scream. The smooth face of the lady's-maid met hers.

"Sorry I startled you, Miss," the woman said, quietly; "but this dress; you wanted it given away, I think? Shall I empty the pocket?"

Eleanor looked back over her shoulder. The dress she had just taken off was being held up for inspection. Her senses began to return.

"Never mind, Turner," she said, slowly; "only rubbish; take it away." But even while she spoke, her eyes were fixed on that red gleam on the floor.

It was the lady's-maid who stooped, at last,

with an exclamation of wonder, as if, for the first time, the glitter had caught her eye.

"Law!" she said, "what a little beauty!" And she picked up from the floor a small ring of ruby and diamonds, the stones set heart-wise, diamonds round a central ruby.

With a little hysterical laugh, Eleanor threw herself back upon the bed.

"What a fool I must be," she muttered, forgetting, in the sudden relief, that any one was near; "I thought it was *blood*," she added, slowly.

The lamp had died down with a sudden spasmodic spurt. The two women were left in total darkness. There was a rustle of silk, a soft gliding, the sound of a low, sustained laugh.

"Get me the matches," cried Eleanor, her teeth chattering with terror. For the first time in her life she was superstitious.

"One, two, three, four," counted a deep voice at the further end of the room. "A good night's work, but a dark one."

There was a jingle of money, the click of a purse snapped to.

"Go away, you impertinent creature," cried Eleanor.

"Did you speak, Miss?" said the respectful voice of the lady's-maid,—it seemed to come from near the door. "I have been hunting for matches. There seem to be none here."

"Was it not you who spoke just now?" said Eleanor, turning hot and cold by turns.

"Me! Law, Miss Gordon, you must be ill, or dreaming, or something. Dear me! how silly-like! here are the matches all the time."

Outside the woman stopped, a moment only, to clench her fist at the closed door, to give some vent to her excitement.

"Turn me away, will you?" she muttered. "Acquaint the missus,—find some one else? Try it on, my pretty dear,—try it on!"

CHAPTER XVI.

MR. CRAMPTON ON BUSINESS MATTERS.

Specious names are lent to cover vices.

Ethel and Blanche had an elder brother.

Robert Crampton was in the army. When Ethel was about thirteen, and Blanche eleven, he had been ordered on foreign service, and ever since that time he had been away from home. He did not, indeed, avail himself of the opportunities he might have had for paying his father a visit. The young man's regiment was his home. He felt most comfortable with his brother officers; and, under the circumstances, this was not wonderful. His own mother was dead, of the present Mrs. Crampton he knew very little, his sisters had been too young to interest him much, and between him and his father there was little or no sympathy.

Occasionally a letter was received from

Robert, who tried, dutifully, to take an interest in his sisters; and of any change in his movements he kept his father apprised.

Mr. Crampton, from a certain feeling of self-blame, had neglected to tell the young man of his sisters' prolonged absence from home, and during the two years' interval, very little communication had passed between him and his home. But, about this time, the regiment to which he belonged was ordered home, and Robert wrote that he would pay them a short visit.

As far as Ethel was concerned, the news was timely. She felt it hard to arouse herself to an interest in the dull routine of every-day life. A new interest had come. She could look forward to seeing once more this brother, who had always been a kind of hero to her imagination.

It was well for Ethel that something should come to turn the current of her thoughts; for, in these days, her mind ran painfully on the one subject,—the strangeness of her own position,—which had been forced upon her in several ways lately.

She had another cause for anxiety and uneasiness. She had written two or three times

to Madame de Motteville; Blanche had also written during her illness; but no answer had come to any of their letters.

The two young girls loved the old lady who had taken them so warmly to her heart, who had trained them so lovingly. This total suspension of all intercourse was very painful to them both, and on Ethel it inflicted a further pain.

In the farewell interview between the old lady and the young girl, it had been understood that Ethel should hear about Erick; for, indeed, Madame de Motteville, who fully intended to write her adopted son a true account of what she believed had led to Ethel's renunciation, did not believe for a moment that he would accept it. Vaguely Ethel had hoped the same. But Madame de Motteville was the one and only link to the past, and she was silent as the grave.

Is there anything in life more sickening than this daily waiting,—this longing for a missive that never comes? There are few in our changeful world who know nothing of its misery —the brightening of the face as the post-hour draws near,—the beating of the heart at sound

of the well-known knock,—the faltering of the voice, asking, "Is it for me?" and then, as day succeeds day, the heaviness growing heavier, the pain more bitter, till at last the eye ceases to flash, the heart to expect.

Something like this was Ethel's experience. She had ceased to think she could hear anything that would bring her comfort or gladness.

The young girl was considered now off the invalid-list — allowed by her anxious step-mother, with a few restrictions as to diet and exercise, to do pretty much as she liked; and, languidly, she was trying to resume her old habits,—the diligent practising of voice and fingers, the superintendence of Blanche's more unwilling efforts, the helping her step-mother to bear her many burdens. Poor Ethel! Gladness seemed to have departed from her life. She was trying diligently to do her duty.

She had one consolation. There was, in the room occupied by the two girls, a little square box of Russian leather. It had two keys. Ethel kept one and Blanche the other.

In the weakness of convalescence, Ethel had told some of her secrets to her young sister. Blanche knew, not, indeed, that Erick had asked

Ethel to be his wife,—this, for his sake, the girl still kept closely hidden; but that she loved him, that this separation was a special pain to her, that Madame had promised to let her know where he was, that some day she hoped to meet him again,—this she let escape her in those long rambling talks, when the girls had been left alone together, to amuse one another, in the solitude of Ethel's sick-room.

Blanche, of course, was deeply sympathetic, —so full, indeed, of the joyful certainty of hope, that she almost inspired her sister with a kindred feeling.

She also loved Erick in her own simple way, and to her it was delightful to dream of the days when he should really belong to them. For Blanche could not have thought that Ethel's love-story would meet with any other ending.

The girls had a few common treasures,—a likeness of Erick, two or three scraps of notes that he had written from time to time to let them know of his arrivals, one or two letters addressed to Ethel when his absences had been prolonged. These were enshrined in this little box, which, while Ethel was kept to her room, Blanche had bought for the purpose; and often during the

languid days of convalescence, Blanche's key was turned in the lock, that they might con over those well-known letters, that they might look at the pictured face.

But now they had another topic of interest. Robert was coming home; and this afforded abundant material for conjecture and comment.

Before Robert came, however, Ethel's faith in humanity was destined to receive another check.

The father of Mr. Crampton's first wife had left property, not to any great extent, but sufficient to provide a comfortable income for his three grandchildren. The time of his death coincided in date with that of the girls' disappearance from their home. He had directed in his will that each of his daughter's three children should receive a certain portion of their respective shares at the age of eighteen. During their minority, their father was appointed sole trustee. Ethel knew nothing whatever about her property, nor had her father proffered any information. He was a saving man, and, with his earnings, a little given to dabbling in speculation. Foreign bonds and general companies' fever was, at that time, at its height.

Mr. Crampton had speculated rather unfortunately; indeed, he was once upon the verge of bankruptcy.

As a clergyman, this would have been a fearful blow to his reputation. He helped himself out of his daughters' estate, hoping that matters would mend. But matters did not mend, only grew worse, and Mr. Crampton was sorely perplexed.

Had it not been, however, for Robert's expected arrival, he would have done nothing, —would have gone on hoping for some lucky turn of dame Fortune's wheel; and, in the meanwhile, keeping his eldest daughter in the dark about her inheritance. But Robert, who knew everything about the property, would probably tell Ethel that she had rights. It would be as well to be beforehand with him, and arrange the matter in some other way.

After much cogitation, Mr. Crampton determined on a certain course of action. He sent for his eldest daughter to go to him in his study.

Ethel was sitting at the window, in the dining-room, working, or trying to work, when the message came. Her cheek still bore traces

of her recent illness, but, at the formal message, a vivid flush overspread her face. Almost unconsciously, her thoughts had flown to Erick. Could her father's communication have anything to do with him?

She jumped up with some of her old alacrity, threw down her work, and went into the study.

Her father was seated at his writing-table, chewing the end of a quill-pen. Papers were on every side of him. He looked a little embarrassed, rather an unusual expression, for Thomas Crampton was generally full of self-confidence.

"Sit down, my dear, sit down," he said, as Ethel entered the room. "I am rejoiced to see you so much better—really, quite the old bloom in your face. Your step-mother has been kind to you, Ethel? You have wanted nothing during your illness?"

"Oh, no, indeed," said Ethel, warmly. "I can't be *too* grateful for Mrs. Crampton's kindness."

The clergyman nodded approvingly.

"Quite right, Ethel; quite right. Ingratitude is rampant in the world. When you reach my age, my dear, you will have found this out

by hard experience. To find my daughters grateful for kindness received is pleasant to my parental feeling. But, always remember this—words are one thing, deeds another. Too often, I am sorry to say, they are antagonistic."

Ethel looked up in some perplexity. This was not the kind of harangue for which her foolish heart had been preparing itself; but she knew her father. His manner of dealing with the simplest subject was often circuitous in the extreme.

"I hope I am not ungrateful, papa?" she said.

"Understand me, my dear." The clergyman threw down his unhappy quill, which had suffered severely from the transient embarrassment; the flow of words had relieved him. "I would not, willingly, accuse *you* of ingratitude, indeed, save in one instance,—and then you acted, doubtless, under the pressure of strong feeling,—I have found you, I must say, rather grateful than the reverse. My reason for saying all this is, that I intend to put you to the proof."

What could this long preamble signify? Had he heard from Erick? Was it necessary, for

some inscrutable reason, that she should give him up? The girl turned very pale.

"Do tell me what you mean, papa."

He smiled re-assuringly. "Don't be frightened, my dear girl; I ask from you no terrible sacrifice. You have reached years of discretion, Ethel. It is quite right that I should take you into the family counsels, that you should clearly understand your own position, and your father's."

Poor Ethel winced. This long harangue was very trying to her nerves.

"My position, papa?" she faltered. "Oh! please—"

"But I must speak of it, Ethel. I see you are a dutiful daughter. You wish me, your father, to be your business medium; to arrange these matters for you; you would prefer to be troubled by nothing of the kind. All very well, and rightly urged. I understand you, my dear; I appreciate your feeling. These affairs are rather for men than for women. Still, for the sake of others,—that you may be able, do you see, to—that is—to answer questions, you know, if inquiry should be made,—I would have you understand your position."

Ethel's perplexity was growing. This was a very different communication from any she could have expected.

"You have certain rights," continued her father; "and, I will not deny it, I have trenched upon them slightly." He waved his hand. "From this, no doubt, an ultimate good may ensue; but the fact remains. A certain capital is payable to you at the present moment. I am unable to produce the full sum. It is a matter, I can assure you, that has vexed me considerably."

Ethel was beginning slowly to understand. This explained many things; her father's complaisance, his unexpected submission to her obstinate silence about the past, his little discourse about gratitude. She said nothing, but turned her face from her father, who, busy with his own eloquence, did not see that a faint smile was curling her lips.

Poor girl! it was a smile of infinite bitterness.

The rest of the clergyman's words flowed over her ears like a torrent of meaningless sound.

All the sense that remained was this: that

certain bonds and shares were to be transferred into her name, in order that the sum due might be represented; that this would, doubtless, be an enormous gain to herself in the future; and that, in the mean time, for plausible reasons,—all of which Mr. Crampton gave with great length and clearest utterance,—Robert should hear nothing of the transaction.

When the girl rose to leave her father's study, she felt weak and faint.

"Blanche," she said that evening, when the candles were out and the house was still, "I feel like Solomon to-night. How tired he must have been when he said it! Yes, it is true. Vanity of vanities—all is vanity!"

"Am *I* vanity?" said Blanche, creeping close to her sister.

"Not yet. Some day, I dare say, you will be like the rest."

"Hush, Ethel! Who scolds papa for believing in nothing and nobody?"

"Papa is about right though; he judges others by himself."

"Ethel!"

The next sound Blanche heard was a stifled sob.

"Blanche! little Blanche!" cried the elder sister. "What shall I do? I am getting wicked."

"You want a long talk with *ma mère*. Oh, Ethel, *do* you think we shall have a letter to-morrow morning?"

"It would do me good even to see her handwriting, Blanche. Do you remember it, the faint, trembling lines? They were like herself, tender and refined. *Ma mère, ma mère*, why have you forgotten your children?"

"Do you think she *can* have forgotten, Ethel?"

Blanche's voice was very low, thrilling with some nameless fear. And Ethel answered that tremor in her voice. "Why do you speak like that, Blanche?"

"Because I am afraid. Oh! Ethel, if—"

"It would be too dreadful!" cried Ethel, starting up in bed. "Blanche, Blanche, I think I *could* not bear it." But the "if," which the young, timorous hearts were too weak to face, seemed the only possible solution to the mystery. Had their dear madame been capable even of holding a pen, she would surely have written

to her children,—could she have given a direction, she would have sent to them.

This Ethel repeated over and over to herself. She could find no solution but one, and from this one her heart shrank, with bitter pain.

CHAPTER XVII.

ETHEL FINDS HERSELF SHUNNED.

How am I changed! my hopes were once like fire!
I loved, and I believed that life was love.
How am I lost!

It was the day of Mrs. Clifford's evening party, —the last of the season, as she remarked, plaintively, to the busy Eleanor.

Why Mrs. Clifford gave these entertainments at all, was a question for the curious; and many of the quick-witted amongst her circle tormented themselves with it in vain.

To go to such enormous expense for other people's benefit seemed ridiculous; and yet, so far as she herself was concerned, the affair seemed utterly devoid of pleasure. Until Eleanor came, indeed, the responsibility of preparation for her parties and receiving her guests had nearly crushed her; now that the responsibility was shifted to younger and abler shoulders, she

was simply passive, but passive in a bewildered, nervous way. She had profound faith in Eleanor; but even Eleanor might forget something,—might make a mistake. Until everything was well over, Mrs. Clifford lived in a state of subdued excitement.

"We have asked too many this time," she said, on the morning of the day, looking round her spacious dining-room with bewildered eyes. "They *can't* all sit down to supper."

"Then they must stand!" said Eleanor, gaily.

"It is all very well to look at things in this cheerful way," returned her patroness, gloomily; "but I feel it will be a failure this time. I wish I had not asked so many. I declare I feel only fit to go to bed."

"Rest a little," said Eleanor, soothingly; "but, above all, don't distress yourself. My word always comes true, and I say this will be a great success."

"I wish I had *your* nerves of iron," wailed the lady. Mrs. Clifford thought nervousness interesting.

"I fear you are not quite so well," said Eleanor, softly; "but, never mind, this even-

ing will soon be over, and then, dear Mrs. Clifford, we shall leave the dust and bustle behind us for a time."

For it was all arranged. Mr. and Mrs. Clifford, with their *protégée*, were to leave London for the Continent on the day following the ball.

In her quiet way, Eleanor had worked upon the mind of her patroness, until Mrs. Clifford seriously thought that the railway journey and short sea-voyage would be the best possible restorative after the fatigue consequent on her grand entertainment.

Mr. Clifford, with the generosity of a man who, having made his money, knows how to spend it, had given his wife's companion *carte blanche* to make whatever arrangements she thought most convenient; and Eleanor, nothing loth, had acted liberally on her instructions. She had hired a courier and a polyglot maid; she had bought the last thing in travelling dresses for herself and Mrs. Clifford; she had ordered the newest and most convenient boxes and portmanteaus. Turner, of course, was to go. She had expressed a wish to travel—a wish which Miss Gordon was pleased to gratify.

Everything was ready. The boxes were packed and standing in the hall, their unsightliness covered for the moment by great pyramids of variegated colouring. Only the evening-party had to be gone through, and the hour mentioned on the invitation-cards was already past.

Mrs. Clifford was sipping coffee and cognac in the boudoir to keep herself up to the occasion; Mr. Clifford, as was his custom, was hidden somewhere; Miss Gordon was alone in the great drawing-room. She stood, her elbows leaning on the marble chimney-piece, and looked meditatively into the mirror, which, through the medium of an opposite one, showed an interminable vista of glittering chandeliers, festoons of roses, red-velvet covered chairs, and Louis Quatorze cabinets. But Eleanor did not see the glitter, her eyes were fixed on the endless reproductions of that one slight figure, with its undulating lines, its harmonious colouring. But the look the girl cast upon herself was rather critical than admirative.

Her face was near the mirror. Fair though it might be in its general effect, she could yet see blemishes—on the cheek some of the pale-

ness of the fading leaf; in the eyes not all the full colour and radiant brightness of youth; on the brow two little lines, very faint, but perceptible; they told of the wearing action of care.

Insensibly, as she gazed, the lines contracted. With a shrug of her white shoulders, and a sigh that was a little weary and sad, Eleanor turned from the too truthful glass.

There were steps on the staircase. She went forward to the door of the room. It was thrown open by the stately butler. "Mr. Crampton, Miss Crampton." The clergyman had made up his mind to be early. He advanced with a beaming smile; but poor Ethel who had not known what early meant at a London ball, and who had come at all sorely against her will, shrank back. To be the first in the room, where Miss Gordon was playing the part of hostess, was misery to the girl's sensitive nature.

"How do you do, my dear, how do you do?" said the clergyman, familiarly; and he looked round the room, with eye-glass fixed. "Very pretty, upon my word, and in excellent taste. You are decorator-in-chief, I believe. Really

the room does credit to you. A word in your ear, Miss Gordon. Ethel is a little shy. A number of strangers, you see — only just recovered too. To tell you the truth, I could scarcely persuade her to come. I have brought her early that I might put her under your wing; besides, I wanted to have a little chat with my friend Mr. Clifford; one can scarcely get a word from him in the day-time. Where is he to be found—in the study? All right, I will find my way there. Now, Ethel, my dear, make yourself perfectly at home."

And so saying, he started off on a voyage of discovery, guided, happy man! by the fumes of tobacco, and the pleasant jingling of glasses, leaving Ethel, nearly crying with vexation, to the tender mercies of Miss Gordon.

It was the old story still. The girl felt it with a pang of passionate impatience. Ethel Crampton had power; she had exercised it more than once during her short life. In this woman's presence her power ebbed away; she was as tame as a dove, as helpless as a child.

She could have stamped her foot, she could have wept with impatient irritation, as she stood there, in the centre of the glittering room,

still as a marble image, her eye-lashes sweeping her flushed cheek, her head a little bent, her hands working nervously, and feeling, as she did, to the very tips of her fingers, that an eye, keen, cool, critical, was looking her over from head to foot; she submitting the while to its inspection like a child, a creature without the power of volition.

And Miss Gordon knew that her victim was writhing mentally under the delicate, lady-like satire of her gentle smile. She did not ask Ethel to sit down, she did not address a word to her, only stood at a little distance, surveying, at her proud leisure, this young girl, who was her rival, and her rival in the only one project on which she had ever set her soul.

To Ethel, who hated herself for her weakness, those few moments might have been hours.

Standing under one of the great chandeliers, —her white dress sweeping the floor, her hair, Titianesque in its colouring, rolled in great coils about her shapely head, and bringing out into full relief the whiteness of her neck and brow,—Ethel was fair as a picture, and her tormentor knew it, felt it to be an indisputable fact.

With a pang, Eleanor Gordon recalled that face in the mirror, its visible fading, its questionable prettiness. And, all the time, the girl she was envying wished that anything would happen, that the bell would ring, that crowds would fill the room, that she could hide herself, that she could pick up courage,—was it courage that she wanted, or power, or what? —to throw herself down on the sofa, and look back at her tormentor boldly.

"You look a little uncomfortable, dearest," said the companion, at last, in her dulcet tones. "Was it that I might have a good look at you, you stood there with the light of the chandelier in your eyes? Well! Ethel, my verdict may be satisfactory to your woman's vanity: a little more animation,—just a little, you know,—to make people believe those marble shoulders of yours are flesh and blood, and you will do execution. Ah! now it comes, that flash is killing, though it should be aimed at higher game than poor little me. You see I am fire-proof." And she gave a light, little laugh. "A caution in your ear, Ethel," she continued, softly, "beware of the ladies! they are all up in arms about your youthful

escapade. Oh! Mrs. Clifford," as that lady, dressed in heavy silk, peeped into the room, "I want to introduce you to my old pupil, Ethel Crampton." Mrs. Clifford's step quickened; she stopped opposite Ethel, who, instinctively, held out her hand; but the hand was, apparently, unseen. Mrs. Clifford was looking her over, from head to foot, with a curiosity which not even politeness could completely veil.

"Ethel Crampton," she repeated, and then, with a stiff bow, passed on to the door, which was beginning to be blocked by arrivals.

Poor Ethel, who felt that the slight was intentional, was in a state of painful bewilderment. She sank down wearily on the nearest settee.

"Never mind," said Eleanor, tapping the girl lightly with her ivory fan, "you will get accustomed to it presently." And she fluttered away after Mrs. Clifford.

Ethel could see her, at the further end of the room, smiling, radiant, her diamonds flashing in the light, her soft dress floating about her, swept hither and thither by her graceful movements.

The girl began to feel uncomfortable. Her

seat was in a prominent position; she was alone; the room was beginning to fill, and several passers-by looked at her with ill-disguised curiosity. She longed for a familiar face, and, at last, she saw one.

A matronly form, arrayed in black and scarlet, a sandy-haired girl on either side, was bearing down upon the settee where she had taken refuge. Ethel rose, and held out her hand, smiling her greeting, but the smile died away upon her lips. For the second time that evening her hand was disregarded or unseen.

"Mrs. Simpkins!"

With a little cry, the matron drew her two girls away.

"Here, my dears, *this* sofa. Ada, tell your father to come here. Where is he? Dear me! have you no eyes? Make haste now."

For Mr. Simpkins, with a broad grin on his face, was making his way rapidly to Ethel Crampton's seat. He was one of her warmest supporters, and, to the poor girl, his broad grin was, at this moment, fair as an angel's smile.

But Mrs. Simpkins could not be utterly disregarded, and her face was beginning to look as dark as her dress. With a little sigh, the

husband and father tore himself away; he, too, drifted on into the distance, and the girl was left stranded and alone in the midst of the growing crowd. Another and another passed her by, members of her father's congregation, friends of her own. Young girls looked at her as if they would have spoken had they dared; matrons drew their skirts about them, fidgetted with bracelets and bouquets, did everything but look in her direction.

The music had struck up; the matrons had taken up their position on sofas and settees; the young men who did not dance blocked the door; the young men who did were gliding about with the white-robed fair.

Ethel was left alone on her side of the settee she had chosen—alone, to look out into the glitter, or down on her flowers; to feel the room floating round her; to know that she was shunned. It was a bitter moment for this girl, who in spirit was pure as the purest there. Her brain felt dizzy, her heart sick. What had she done to be so treated?

She longed to rise from her seat, to hide in a corner of the room, to leave the place altogether; but the uncomfortable feeling of being

watched detained her. She sat quietly, a forced smile on her lips, for she would not show her discomposure. But the girl was weak from her recent illness; she felt, at last, as if further to dissimulate would be impossible. Leaning against the cushions, she closed her eyes with a sigh.

"Miss Crampton!" Ethel started, and looked round. The music had stopped. Promenaders of many a brilliant hue were pacing the room, like walking flowers; there was a rustling of silks, a trampling of many feet, a murmur of conversation.

"Where am I?" said the bewildered girl.

"Dreaming!" said a gay voice, "and in the midst of such a brilliant scene! Miss Crampton, you must be a philosopher."

The owner of the gay voice was a young man with an indefinite kind of face; his hair was light; his budding moustache was golden; his blue eyes sparkled in pleasant, not cynical, mirth.

Looking up, Ethel smiled, in spite of herself. There was something re-assuring to her trembling nerves in this gay suggestion that a dream had been the cause of her abstraction.

"I should like to be a philosopher," she said, "if by a philosopher you mean a person who cares nothing whatever about what goes on around him; but I fear—"

"Excuse me for interrupting you," broke in the young man, "but really these are scarcely the sentiments I should have expected from you. While we are young and happy, we *ought* to care. Coldness and inanition, and—well! a general disregard of externals will come in very well as a support for old age. 'Sans teeth,' &c., according to the immortal Shakspeare. Youth is short, and we ought to enjoy it; which brings me round to my point. Will you permit me to *enjoy* the next dance—ah!" consulting the programme, "a valse—*tant mieux*—with you?"

"I shall be very happy," replied Ethel, her spirits rising—his gaiety and geniality were infectious—"only—you seem to know *me*. I have not the faintest idea—"

"Who *I* may be? Well! it is all Miss Gordon's fault. She seems to be mistress of the ceremonies here, and I have been pestering her this last half-hour for an introduction. She was always busy in some way; so, at last, in

my despair, which, indeed, could alone justify so painful a breach of etiquette in an English drawing-room, I have spoken without an introduction. Will you forgive me? My name is Clifford. I happened to know you by sight. Your brother, by-the-bye, is in my regiment."

"Robert!" said Ethel, smiling now, and animated; "then he has arrived in England. How naughty of him not to have been near us yet!"

"His leave only begins next week. The regiment is at Aldershot now. I am *not* on leave—only ran over to-day to chaperone my sister to this ball, and to let her and my father see that I am alive after the rigours of an Indian hot season, which, I believe, they were fully persuaded would kill me right off."

"Then your sister is here this evening?"

"Yes, if you have forgiven me for introducing myself, I will take upon me to introduce her to you, as soon as ever I can find her at rest, for a moment; but, here is the music. Now, Miss Crampton, are you so much of a philosopher as not to feel your feet trembling to be off?"

"I have told you already that my preten-

sions to philosophy are very small," replied Ethel, and, in her turn, she glided into the maze of the dancers. Her cheek began to flush, her eye to gleam. She was young, and the music, the soft motion, the gaiety of colour, the brightness of young life, were sufficient to make her forget her troubles, or, if she did not forget, if she felt that the women were eyeing her askance, she felt too that the men were looking at her admiringly, and with the women's attention, she said to herself, she could afford to dispense. In spite of them all she would enjoy.

She *did* enjoy. One or two in the room were surprised at the girl's manner that evening. There was something almost reckless in its gaiety. With her cheeks the colour of carmine, her eyes flashing, her head erect, she chatted, and danced, and laughed.

Partners came in a great multitude, introduced and unintroduced. When she sat down, her seat was thronged; when she rose, her steps were haunted; but, during the whole time, not a lady in the room addressed a word to Ethel Crampton. Except once, indeed. Eleanor Gordon and she were *vis-à-vis* in a

quadrille. Pressing her fingers lightly, as they joined hands in the lady's chain, the companion whispered—

"Ethel, I have found him. What message shall I take from you?"

The girl tried to look as if she had neither heard nor understood; but she did not know, like her opponent, how to use the world's mask. In spite of herself, the vivid colour dyed her cheek.

Later in the evening the re-action came. The ball-room had thinned; most of the gentlemen were in the supper-room; the band had ceased for the time; a lady, invited on account of her talent, was playing a brilliant fantasia on the piano, to fill up the interval; ladies were scattered, in twos and threes, about the great room, discussing experiences, and detailing gossip. For the second time that evening Ethel was left alone. Her spirits fell, she felt weary, faint, dejected, and, what was, perhaps, worse than all, bitterly discontented with herself. All her foolish speeches, that at the moment had seemed brilliant flashes of wit, returned in this short, sober quarter of an hour to face her and convince her of folly.

"How silly I have been!" said the girl to herself; and then, "If Erick had seen me, or *ma mère.*"

She rose to her feet. No one now seemed to notice her movements, and she felt as if the air of the ball-room would choke her; she longed to find a hidden spot, where, for a short moment, she might rest and think. Close beside her seat was a door half-veiled by lace curtains. Ethel pushed aside the curtains and went in. There was a tender semi-light, a heavy fragrance. She sank down in a little lounging-chair, and covered her face with her hands. She was trying to think, to realize her position, to understand why they hated her; and the thinking was hard for her brain. She wished to hurt no one. Erick, even her Erick, might go. Had she tried to keep him? All she asked was to be happy in her joyous youth, to be happy in God's world.

And they would not let her. She was hedged in by mistakes and follies, cut off from sympathy. She looked up into the night, a gleam of defiance in her eyes.

The white moonlight, calm and soft, was

peering in through the shining foliage of tropical plants; above her towered a lily, stately and pure, its star-like petals and golden heart looking up into the calm of the nightly heavens. There were hanging baskets of trailing blossoms, bright-leaved ferns, that quivered in the moonlight.

"The flowers are happy," said Ethel to herself; "*they* can rest. I—oh, my God!—I think I rest, and my rest is gone, and fresh troubles come, fresh mistakes."

And then, all at once, she smiled tenderly. Her mind had taken a great leap. She was a child once more—a child full of faith and hope, just opening her eyes to life's mysteries, beautiful mysteries, fair beliefs.

"He said," she whispered, covering her face with her hands, "he said there was heaven in my face that day. If it could come again! But the heaven has gone from me for ever. I am learning to hate, to be wicked. Is he learning it, too! Are these the lessons of the world?"

She shrank back into her corner. There was a rush of wind through an opened pane; the leaves rustled, the lily bowed her head, and

Ethel sighed a deep sigh, which echoed through the silent place. There came the sound of voices from close outside the veiled door. Two shadows were thrown across the tesselated floor of the conservatory. Ethel did not wish to listen; she shrank into the furthest corner of her little retreat; but, in spite of herself, her ear caught the words. They were so clearly spoken, though in a low, gentle voice; and there was something familiar in those tones. Ethel's heart gave a great leap. Where had she heard them before?

"Do introduce me to her, Angus," said the voice. "Come, you know, you promised. I have been watching her all the evening. I want *so* much to speak to her."

And then Ethel felt herself shrink and shiver in the darkness, for the other voice was familiar too.

"Why do you wish to speak to her, Gertrude? I intended, I know, to introduce you to her, for I thought there was a considerable amount of spite and jealousy in all this scandal that has been diligently circulated about her. Besides, I was awfully sorry for the girl when I saw her sitting by herself, like a kind of Pariah, amongst

all these fine folks, many of whom are no better than they should be themselves; but—I rather think I have changed my mind."

"Dear Angus," said the clear, gentle voice—on Ethel's ear it fell like music—"I never knew you uncharitable before. What has made you change your mind in this sudden way?"

"I wish you would not ask so many questions, Gertrude. Girls don't understand this kind of thing. Why can you not take my word for it? The girl is a capital companion, evidently knows a thing or two, is very handsome and lively; I should enjoy a flirtation with her any day; but she is not precisely the kind of associate I should choose for my sister."

"Angus!" There was a slight tone of irritation in the clear voice. "I do think men are all alike. They judge hastily, because they see no deeper than the surface. I have been watching Ethel Crampton all the evening, and I understand her better than you. My dear brother, you are very unjust. You have seen in her manner gaiety—levity, perhaps; it offends your taste. The woman who is treated as a Pariah by women should, you think, sit down meekly under the position—show them,

by her humility, that she recognizes the justice of their treatment; and *I* tell you this, that the high spirit, conscious of rectitude, can *not* sit down calmly under injustice, that the gaiety and lightness is the heart's protest, that the laughter and merriment often hide a wounded spirit."

Another shadow was thrown on the pavement, a shadow bent in the curve of a graceful bow, for the band had struck up again, the dancers had resumed their places.

And Ethel, the unwilling hearer of this little debate, whose tears were falling thick and fast, trembled involuntarily.

Her heart—that the long suffering of this strange evening had chilled and hardened till her very nature seemed to be changing under the blighting influence of injustice—had warmed to this woman champion. A great longing had come over her to see the owner of the kindly voice, to put her hand in that of a woman friend, to tell her troubles to an understanding heart; and now the music and gaiety, the tumult and whirl, would bear her *one* friend away. She would never know *who* it was that had understood her that night.

In a moment her fear was set at rest.

"I am a little tired, Captain Mordaunt," said Gertrude; "I shall dance no more to-night." Then to her brother, in a voice clearly audible to those who stood near,—"Angus, I shall rest in the conservatory. Don't let me interfere with your movements in any way, only, like a good fellow, try and find Miss Crampton. I wish specially to speak to her."

Mrs. Simpkins, who had been trying to cultivate the heiress, was near. She turned with a surprised look.

"I did not know you knew Miss Crampton."

But she received no answer. Gertrude had vanished into the darkness of the conservatory.

Angus Clifford, Ethel's first partner that evening, turned away with a little smile.

"I suppose I must do as she wishes," he said to himself. "But, good gracious! how the girl warmed up! I didn't know our pale little Gertrude had so much in her."

CHAPTER XVIII.

"SHE'S MY SISTER."

There is a lust in man no power can tame,
Of loudly publishing his neighbour's shame;
On eagle's wings invidious scandals fly,
While virtuous actions are but born, and die.

Robert Crampton was a favourite among his fellow-officers. There was nothing very particular about him. He was neither very handsome, nor very clever, nor very witty. Indeed, he was rather mild in character. What gained him friends were his strict uprightness and extreme good-nature; his word could be absolutely depended upon, and he was always ready to forget himself in order to oblige another. His one passion was for the proprieties—his brother-officers told him, laughingly, that Mother Grundy was nothing to him; his one love was light literature.

With a magazine or the last new novel, he could always make himself happy. He could

so thoroughly absorb himself in this kind of reading as to be totally blind and deaf to all that went on around him. He had a trick of curling himself up in some out-of-the-way corner, a novel in his hand.

Conversation would go on around him, even his name would be mentioned, he would be utterly unconscious. This trick had earned for him, in the regiment, the playful *sobriquet* of "Mouse,"—a name which, his friends said, suited him so well that they would never call him by any other.

It was the afternoon of the day following Mrs. Clifford's ball, and Angus Clifford had returned to Aldershot. He sat smoking in the reading-room. The *Times* was in his hand; but to peruse it seemed, at the moment, too great an effort for his mind.

"By Jove!" he said, at last, throwing it down, "it's too hot for politics, Mordaunt," to a Dragoon, who, extended on one of the couches, was, or appeared to be, languidly watching the ceiling. "Do you know where Mouse is?"

"Met him outside, a moment ago, my dear fellow. Talking of Mouse, what did you think of the beauty last night?"

"There were two or three who might fairly claim that title," replied Angus, a little coldly.

"A beauty!" said a younger man, who had just lounged in. "Not so many of 'em now, by Jove! Where did you see her, Mordaunt?"

"At a ball last night," said the other, languidly. "Awful bore! felt it my duty to go—six weeks' invitation, and a choice of heiresses. Ask Clifford about the beauty; he took her up, championed her, &c."

"I wish you wouldn't talk such confounded nonsense," returned Angus, a little angrily. He was still a novice to his profession, and not totally hardened to chaff.

"There, there," said the other, in mock-apology, "smooth your ruffled feathers, my dear fellow. Beauty in distress, as we all know, is a touching sight, and your tenderness of heart is proverbial."

"*Reawly*," said the last comer, a very new fellow, seating himself and drawing out a cigar. "This becomes deuced exciting. Clifford, I *implaw* you, enter into particulars."

"Clifford was touched, I tell you," replied Captain Mordaunt. "Don't you see he's blushing. The fact is the beauty, if fair, was frail.

No, now Clifford, you can't take such an interest in her as all that."

"Why *will* you persist in saying I take a special interest in her?" cried the young man. "I met her for the first time last night. She was introduced to the house by that *protégée* of my aunt's."

"Who is pretty, too," broke in the other, "but not to be compared with the young one. But, look here, Clifford, I'm curious. Is it true that she was lost for two years?"

"Quite true, I believe."

"And only just turned up again. Persists in silence *about* the two years. 'Pon my word, it looks precious queer for her."

"*Vewy* much so, indeed," drawled the youngest of the three. "Beautiful, too, by Jove! What did you say her name was?"

"Ethel Crampton. Father a clergyman, rather an inattentive parent, if I might be supposed to be a competent judge of a paterfamilias. Certainly the girl was allowed to do pretty much as she liked. The story got about, you know, and the women fought shy of her; but the men—good gracious! I never saw a girl so run after. I tried prudently to keep my fingers out of the

fire—'a burnt bairn,' you know; but Clifford here was foremost in the fray."

Angus laughed a little awkwardly.

"You should measure words, old fellow, when you talk about a lady."

"A lady?" returned Captain Mordaunt, with a low, sustained whistle. "Question is, you see, whether Miss Ethel hasn't forfeited—"

He stopped suddenly. A livid face had emerged from behind the screen that kept off the draught from the door; a hoarse, agitated voice broke short the sentence. "For God's sake, stop! She's my sister!"

"Mouse!" cried the three voices together. But, before they could recover from their surprise, Robert Crampton had disappeared.

The three young men who had been discussing poor Ethel so freely were anything but ill-natured. They looked at one another in consternation.

"There," said Angus Clifford, at last, "you have done it now. I tried to stop you."

"Did you know Mouse was there?" Captain Mordaunt turned almost fiercely on his companion.

"Of course not. Do you think, if I had

known it, I should have said what I did? But I knew she was his sister, though, poor old fellow! and so did you, Mordaunt."

"I *wish* Mouse wouldn't be so queer in his ways," muttered the captain, disconsolately. "If he were not one of the best fellows in the regiment, one might think he had done it on purpose. That it should happen to poor old Mouse, too!" he continued, drawing his cigar from between his lips, and looking at it meditatively, "with his ultra-proper notions; and, by Jove! he looked precious queer. You are his friend, Clifford; go and find him, and make it up."

"It's a warning," said Angus Clifford, solemnly. "Names are dangerous, especially ladies' names. You never know who may be taking a deep interest in them." He rose in rather a doubtful way. "I scarcely know whether I ought to go near him just now. He might take it amiss."

"Go, go!" cried the others. "It's a shame to let him believe we meant anything."

And, leaving the reading-room, Angus Clifford made his way, somewhat hesitatingly to his friend's quarters. He found Robert Crampton

in his hut. A portmanteau was open before him. He was busy tossing in a few things. He looked up as Angus entered, and the pallor of his face passed into a dark flush.

"*May* I sit down?" said the young man. Then, as the other nodded his assent,—"Look here, old fellow," he continued, in an embarrassed tone, "it's no use taking things like this. We are awfully sorry for what we said just now. I could bite off my tongue for my own stupidity; but, you see—"

"Yes," said Robert Crampton, sitting down, in his turn. "It's absurd to be offended with any of you. Of course, you couldn't know that I was there; but I tell you what it is, Angus, people should be careful how they go and publish such odious calumnies."

"If it's a calumny, Robert—"

"If," the young man turned fiercely on his friend. "I tell you it is, and the very basest that ever was uttered. By heaven! it's bad enough to have any one belonging to a person talked of in this kind of way; but for a friend like you to believe it true—Look here, Clifford, I'm going home now, and shall make it my business to get to the

bottom of this. The fact is, I suppose, that she's good-looking, and the women are jealous. As a favour to me, say no more about the matter; when I come back, I'll be in a position to prove the utter falsehood of it all."

Angus Clifford looked a little grave, as he answered—"Of course, I will say nothing more. I tried to check the gossip then, if you remember, and I only hope—"

"Hope nothing," broke in Robert Crampton, angrily. "If any of these women's base scandal should turn out to be—bah! what bosh am I talking?—true, that my sister, my mother's daughter, should have forfeited her reputation; but if—one may say if, you know, without fearing anything—I'd sell out, I'd enlist, I'd never face any of you again."

"Don't talk so wildly, Robert," said his friend.

He saw that the wild words, the positive assurance of certainty, hid a heart that trembled when it would have been firm as a rock. And it was even so.

In those few moments of agitated preparation for departure, the memory of the past years had flashed over Robert's mind. The long cessation of letters from home, the two

or three in which his sisters' names had been unmentioned, letters to Ethel which had received no answer, and then the sudden resumption of intercourse, his father's letters full of praises of his eldest daughter's appearance and manner, notes and messages from Ethel and Blanche themselves. It had struck him at the time as strange; but he was never accustomed to analyze his father's motives for action of any kind. To him they had always been incomprehensible. But this two years' absence from home would explain all.

Robert Crampton, the pleasant, amiable young officer, who had been accustomed to take things easily, whose love of popularity and general good-nature had led him to avoid anything in the shape of a quarrel, knit his brows and clenched his fist.

He had been humiliated in the person of his sister; through her, his name had been brought into contempt.

"She *shall* tell me everything," he said to himself, as the train whirled rapidly homewards, "or—" And the darkening of his brow, which filled up the unspoken thought, showed his fierce determination.

CHAPTER XIX.

FURTHER TROUBLES.

Merciful God! let me entreat Thy mercy!
I have seen all the woes of men—pain, death,
Remorse, and worldly ruin; they are little,
Weighed with the woe of woman when forsaken
By him she loved and trusted.

It was late in the evening of that day. Ethel and Blanche were sitting together in the drawing-room. The house was very still, for Mr. and Mrs. Crampton had gone out to dine, and the children were in bed. The room was dark, but they would light neither candle nor lamp. Both of the girls had a love for the dark hour. Ethel was seated in an arm-chair by the table, Blanche was curled up at her feet.

"Why wouldn't you go to-night, Ethel?" she asked, after a long silence. "Miss Clifford is to be there."

"I want to see her again," replied the girl, softly. "Blanche, she is just like an angel, with such a sweet, calm face; it does one's

heart good only to look at her; but—I have come to hate going out. I intend to stay at home, and let you do the family-honours."

"Don't talk such nonsense, dear!" replied the young girl; "and, besides, that isn't an answer. I want to know why you seem not to care about these parties. You did when we first came home."

Ethel rose from her seat, and stood looking out into the night. She was wondering what she ought to do. Would it be better to tell Blanche all she had suffered, to let her know the miseries of their common fate, or to wait for a while? The girl would hear it sooner or later. The question was hard; for poor Ethel longed, with a passionate yearning, to save her young sister from some, at least, of the wretchedness she had undergone.

Blanche followed her to the window.

"Do you know, Ethel," she said, a little querulously, "you have been rather mysterious lately? I am not so *very* much younger than you. You might tell me things."

To which rather vague protest, Ethel replied by drawing her young sister to her old place on the rug, and stroking her fair hair lovingly.

"Has it ever struck you, Blanche—" she began, but the sentence was destined to remain unfinished.

A cab dashed up to the door, the bell was violently rung, the two sisters rose hastily to their feet.

"Who can it be at this hour?" cried Ethel.

"I know," said the wiser Blanche. "It's Robert. How delightful!" And she ran out to the hall.

The impatient visitor *was* Robert. He stood on the threshold of his father's house, peering strangely into the darkened hall, and inquiring if Mr. Crampton were within. Martha said that the young ladies were alone. She had not seen the cab and luggage, and, as she perseveringly maintained afterwards, to account for her behaviour on the occasion, he looked that strange and wild that she could never have thought it was the young master. She was about to slam the door in his face, when Blanche, excited and eager, darted forward into the hall.

"Martha!" she cried, "it's Robert, I do believe; don't shut the door." And she struck a light.

Blanche was right. Martha, who had known

Robert as a young boy, recognized him instantly, and, throwing the door open, vented her displeasure with herself on the cabman, whom she ordered to carry in the portmanteau, and make haste about it. Very timidly, Blanche, in the mean time, led her brother into the drawing-room, where Ethel, a little nervous too, was waiting to receive him. She had lighted the lamp in the interval; it shone full on her fine face, tremulous with expectation and delight.

"Papa is out," she said, advancing to meet her brother, "and so is Mrs. Crampton. We did not expect you so soon, Robert."

"I suppose not," replied the young man, taking her offered hand, but a little coldly, Ethel thought. This was not the kind of meeting the girl had imagined; but, as she said to herself bitterly, "her expectations were always destined to disappointment."

"But we 're ever so glad to see you, Robert," cried Blanche, who had never been awkward in her life.

"Are you, little one?" replied he; and he stooped to kiss his young sister; then, to Ethel, looking at her a little shyly—Robert, like

many weak people, wanted tact, a disagreeable business was before him; he thought the finest proof of courage would be to dash into it at once, —"I am rather glad to find my father out," he said. "I wished particularly to speak to you alone. There *need* be no necessity for reference to him in this business, and, after all, what is it? A mere form, I am sure."

Said Ethel, a little astonished at this opening —she could only imagine that he referred to her money-matters,—"Papa has explained my affairs to me, Robert. I am quite satisfied."

"What affairs do you mean, Ethel?"

The girl blushed. "I supposed you meant to speak about my property."

"Property!"—the young man smiled bitterly,—"I wish that were all I had to speak about. Throw your money to the winds, my dear girl, if so it please you; but, for Heaven's sake, be careful of your reputation! Make yourself poor, and only yourself suffers; lose your good name, and—but I am a fool to run on in this way. I would not condemn any one unheard, least of all my own sister. And now, Ethel, for your own sake, and your family's, I beseech you to be frank with me. What 's

the meaning of all these extraordinary rumours that have got about with regard to you?"

As her brother spoke, Ethel's cheek grew pale; but his way of questioning her had been harsh and cold: the rebellious woman's heart rose within her. She looked up proudly.

"You must tell me what reports, and circulated by whom, Robert, before I can answer. Your charges, at present, are exceedingly vague."

"Charges," he answered, a little angrily, "I made none. I must say, Ethel, that your way of answering me is equivocal. You know what I mean, or you do not. Which am I to believe?"

"I deny your right to ask me these questions at all," said the girl, proudly. "I am living in my father's house, and under his protection. He is the only person who has any right over my actions."

"Then brotherhood counts for nothing," said the young man, bitterly. He stopped speaking, and paced the room with nervous, agitated strides. Blanche, utterly mystified, was watching him wonderingly. Ethel, very pale, sat on the sofa, her eyes looking out straight before her.

"I have made a bad beginning," said Robert,

at last, throwing himself down on the opposite side of the sofa. "I had forgotten, I suppose, that you are a woman, Ethel, and women are not so easy to deal with. The fact is, I have heard a queer rumour, untrue, I believe, though how it can have got about beats me entirely. You are good-looking; the women, perhaps, are jealous; but it's an awful bore, for our fellows have got hold of it, and your name—our name—has been bandied about in a way that makes me perfectly ill even to remember. I had a mind to knock down two or three of them to-day, but they were my best friends, good fellows, all of them; they only repeated what they had heard from others. I tell you what it is, if I could get hold of the base originator of the falsehood, I—" and he clenched his fist.

Ethel had turned white, even to the lips.

"What did they say of me, Robert?" she asked, in a voice so faint and low that her brother started. The kindliness of his nature re-asserted itself.

"Don't take it to heart, my dear girl; we have only to prove the falseness of the rumour."

"Tell me, I entreat of you," she answered.

Instinctively Robert had been working round the point he wished to gain. It had been difficult, with the dark hint of suspicion in his own mind,—flashed upon him by the light words of his fellow-officers,—to speak of that rumour in this stately woman's presence; for, like his father, Robert was utterly taken by surprise with Ethel's beauty and dignity.

He laughed a little awkwardly. "If you must have it, you must. Pure folly, of course. Mind you, I believe not a word. They say you were away from home for two years,—left in some mysterious way,—and returned a short time ago. They declare, further, that you persist in maintaining an obstinate silence about these two years, and that in consequence—"

"Hush, Robert, hush," cried Ethel, earnestly, for Blanche had been listening. She stood, with crimsoned cheek and dilating eyes, looking at Ethel, as if asking her leave to speak.

An idea had come to the elder sister. Blanche's name had not been mentioned by the scandal-mongers,—she might be saved from this dark doubt and suspicion.

"My little darling," she said to her sister, "will you do me a great favour? You shall

hear, Blanche; I will tell you everything,—only, now, I would rather speak to Robert alone. See about his room, that everything is ready for him, and supper."

"You will tell me, Ethel?"

"Yes, yes, everything."

Reluctantly, the young girl left the room. Brother and sister were alone together.

"Then," began Robert—the young man was literally trembling with excitement.

"They speak the truth," said Ethel, calmly; "but not all. I *was* away from home during those two years. I left my father's house, because—there 's no use in going back, is there? He has been good to me since. He found me, —where I had been for the whole time,—with an old French lady, who lives in a little village on the south coast."

Robert's face brightened. "Well! there could be no harm in that. It was only like being at school. I suppose the name may be known, and all the rest of it. Did she find you when you left home, or had you been acquainted with her before? It is important, you see, for the sake of your character, that all these particulars should be made known."

"I cannot tell you *how* we went there," said Ethel, who spoke with apparent effort.

"Cannot! What do you mean? you must remember."

"Yes, I remember." The girl smiled rather strangely. Remember! were not the events of that day and night burned into her brain for ever?

"My dear girl," said Robert, gently,—he would try mildness and persuasion first; "do you know what you are doing in preserving this obstinate silence? Do you know that you are destroying your reputation, losing your chances for success in the world? It is natural that women, and men too, should like to know something about those with whom they associate. You know very little of society and its laws. I can tell you, as regards women, they are a trifle hard. Be guided by me in this matter. That there should be in the life of a woman any one incident which will not bear the light, is, of itself, damning to her reputation. I am using strong words, Ethel," he continued, apologetically, "but it is because I wish to bring you to reason at once. A lady's life should lie open to the whole world. I can never believe that my sister's will not. I see

you have some motive for secrecy. You wish, perhaps, to shield some one. Tell me, at least; I am your brother. It shall be my business to right you."

Ethel was leaning back on the sofa. She felt sick and weary, but her determination was, if possible, stronger than before. Shuddering, she thought of what the result might be if Robert should come to know all.

"I *have* thought, Robert," she said. "I know all you say; I knew it before you told me. Thank you for your kind intentions. I know your motive for speaking as you have done is good. But it is all in vain. I can tell you no more."

"Say rather you will not," returned her brother, angrily. "You have heard, calmly enough, I will say, the consequences to yourself of this most absurd obstinacy. I must only suppose you have become accustomed to insult. Now, listen to what the consequences may be to me. Your name is a by-word in the regiment, and remember this, your name is mine. I left to-day, declaring that these rumours were false. If I return, it must be to acknowledge that they were founded on fact. I can never do this. The dishonour would kill me."

"Dishonour!" gasped the girl. "Robert, you are cruel."

"Dishonour!" he repeated slowly; "it is nothing short of this. When will women understand these things as men do? I tell you plainly, Ethel, unless your name is cleared, and you are the only person who can clear it, I must leave the regiment; and then, for my home is hateful enough, goodness alone knows what will become of me. I suppose my sister cares precious little."

He spoke, and rose to go towards the door.

Ethel put out her hands with a cry of pain.

"Robert, Robert!"

"Have you made up your mind to tell me everything?" he answered, facing her again. His brows were knit, his pale lips worked convulsively. Perhaps the revelation would be worse than the secret. And yet as he looked upon his sister's pure face, he could not bring himself to believe anything against her. "Speak, Ethel," he said, more gently; "there can be nothing that, for your own sake, you would wish to conceal."

She looked up at him pleadingly.

"Robert, if I could I would. Please, please,

be satisfied. God knows I have done nothing of which I need be ashamed. I have been mistaken it is true, but— Oh! Robert, listen to me."

For the young officer had turned away angrily.

"Why should I listen to you?" he cried. "They say all women are false; but it's hard to begin the experience with one's own sister. And now, Ethel, *you* may listen to me. I must leave my regiment, as I told you; my life is broken, my aims in life are destroyed. You have done this. From this time forth I will devote myself to the task of finding out your secret, and of punishing the person, whoever that person may be, who has taught you to act as you have done, or, as I begin to fear, for whose sake you are deceiving us all."

He went out of the room, slamming the door behind him, and Ethel was left alone with a weary, aching heart; for this was a blow altogether unexpected, and very hard to bear.

Her cheek burned in the solitude, as she thought of all she had heard that night. They had dared to speak of her lightly, to bandy her name about with scorn, perhaps, and unseemly jests, these men to whom she had given her

girlish smiles, her gay words. No wonder Robert's spirit had been roused to anger.

Covering her face with her hands she crouched down, in an agony of shame; but what could she do? Only one person could right her, and he was far away; besides, not for worlds would she have had him know her position. She was alone—alone against the world.

For a few moments Ethel gave way to her despair, then, suddenly recovering herself, she remembered that Blanche was alone, that Robert might wring the cherished secret from her young sister's weakness. She rose and went into the dining-room.

Supper was on the table, and neither Robert nor Blanche was there; but while she stood looking round her there came from overhead the sound of a little scuffle; she could hear Blanche's voice raised in tones of indignant protest.

"Robert, Robert, give it to me, please."

Clearing the stairs two steps at a time, Ethel rushed to her own room, as the voices had seemed to come from there. Her hand trembled, her head throbbed; she feared, she scarcely knew what, but within her room, at the moment, all was still.

With a beating heart, Ethel opened the door. Blanche was alone; she had thrown herself down on the bed; her face was covered; tears were forcing their way through her closed fingers.

"What is it, dear?" said Ethel, stooping over her. She spoke calmly, but there was a white agony in her face, that made the tears of her young sister flow faster.

"I—couldn't—couldn't—help it, Ethel," she cried, through her sobs. "Robert is bad, cruel."

"Have you told him anything, dear?" asked Ethel, in a voice, patient, but, oh! so weary—this would be the culminating woe; and yet, even to this, at the moment, her heart felt dead.

"I have not told him," replied the young girl, sitting up and throwing back her hair from her face. "His nasty, strong hands could not make me speak; but, oh, Ethel! what will you say? He has our likeness."

Ethel looked round; a film seemed to be gathering over her sight, there was a darkness in the lighted room; but through the darkness she could see, only too clearly.

The little shrine stood open, their treasure had gone. Alas! alas! it was not only a treasure, but a clue.

"Has he any of the letters?" she gasped.

"No, he didn't see them. Ethel, darling, for pity's sake don't look so strange. I hate Robert for giving us all this trouble. I was looking at him. You see I felt unhappy, when you sent me away, and I thought if only Erick would come, we might go back to *ma mère;* from thinking about Erick, I thought I would like to see him, so I opened the box, and took out the likeness. Then,—Ethel dear, *are* you listening to me?—*what* are you thinking about? —I heard the door open softly. It gave me such a start. Robert was standing, looking over my shoulder; but he looked so strange, that at first I didn't know him, and before I could prevent him, he had snatched away the likeness, hurting my wrists with his horrid hands. I begged him to give it back.—Ethel, do you hear?"

For Ethel's eyes had closed. She was lying back in her chair, unconscious of her sister's voice. The emotions of the day had been too much for the girl. Martha, who quickly answered Blanche's cry of distress, found her in a dead faint.

PART IV.

WEAK HEARTS AND WAYWARD FATES.

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CHAPTER I.

MISS BROOK'S STORY.

> Such is the world, whoso it can behold!
> In each estate is little heartës rest;
> God lend us each to take it for the best.

A FEW words will suffice to sum up the history of *my* life, during these years which had been so eventful to my children.

On the day following Mr. Crampton's visit of inquiry, I received a letter from Erick, which set my mind at ease with regard to him. He had left home on one of his sudden journeys, but promised to see me again soon, and, in the mean time, to let me hear of him occasionally.

His letter was so entirely natural, that it at once allayed all those half-formed suspicions

which had cost me such bitter pain. I looked upon the coincidence in time between his departure and the flight of the young girls as an accident, and blamed myself severely for having suspected him in the matter.

I was still full of anxiety about Ethel and Blanche, for the interest I had taken in them was very deep, and as the days and months went by my heart sank. I missed them too. The house and garden seemed dull, and I did not care to wander beyond them. My artist friends came and went, as usual. Erick's bower in the woods had been left under their special care. It had gained a certain celebrity in the neighbourhood, having been given the name of Græme's Folly, and many were the visitors who solicited from Mr. Burgess and Herr Schmidt the favour of a view. They persuaded me sometimes to accompany them; but for me, my boy's wonder had lost much of its glamour. "The Elms," in fact, had become rather distasteful to me, and yet I would not leave the place altogether, it was endeared by so many pleasant recollections.

I determined, at last, to take a house in London, and spend part of the year there.

To this plan, Erick, who came to see me in the winter of that year, cordially agreed, and said, indeed, that this was what he had long wished, although he had almost feared to propose it.

He made all necessary arrangements; and, early in the following spring, I said good-bye to our old home, leaving it in the care of trustworthy servants, and established myself in a small house in the West End.

I had not entirely lost sight of Mr. Crampton, for although I cared very little for himself personally, I was deeply anxious about his daughters; besides, his self-denying little wife had inspired me with a sincere feeling of friendship. I respected Mrs. Crampton, from my heart.

Our house was well situated and elegantly furnished. To all the small details of the establishment Erick had attended himself with minute care. I was not surprised, therefore, to find, shortly after my arrival, that Mr. Crampton had left his card.

A note followed. He was in London, making arrangements for the transport of his family to a small suburban residence. It would be

pleasant, he said, in the metropolis, to renew our former intimacy.

During the year that intervened between this date and that of the return of Ethel and Blanche to their father's home, my acquaintance with the clergyman and his family was kept up in a desultory kind of way,—one or two visits, an interchange of dinner invitations, and several pastoral calls; for Mr. Crampton, somewhat to my amusement, had constituted himself my spiritual adviser. There had not been much real intimacy between us.

At the time of Miss Gordon's discovery, I had taken the advantage of Erick's absence—he had announced his intention of travelling for a year—to spend a month at "The Elms."

I wanted time and quietness for the conclusion of one of my literary efforts, and I felt that, during the past year, our old home had been rather neglected. My task occupied me for a longer time than I could have expected. I spent the summer in the country, returning to London in the month of September. How well I remember that day! Autumn in the country had been pleasant and calm; in London it looked bleak and grey. As I drew up before

my own house, my heart sank within me. Erick was away; there was no voice of kindly welcome. I said to myself that it would have been better to have remained in my old home.

But the next day I was glad I had come.

Mr. Crampton, who had heard from the servants that I was expected, came to see me, bringing the joyful intelligence that Ethel and Blanche had been found.

"I have been anxious for your return, Miss Brook," said the clergyman. "You took a great interest in my daughters when they were younger. Perhaps now you may be able to persuade my eldest—Ethel, you will doubtless remember her?—to treat us all with a little more confidence."

"What!" I cried, aghast, "you surely know where the children were during their absence from home."

"A moment, my dear Miss Brook," said the clergyman. "You must oblige me by joining in the popular mistake. You see the affair has been rather serious for my eldest daughter. I greatly fear it will be more so. We have managed to exclude Blanche's name altogether from the scandal. Even her eldest brother

believes now that Ethel was the only one to leave her home."

"Then there has been a scandal? My poor Ethel! But surely, Mr. Crampton, there must be some means of finding out?"

The clergyman shook his head. "None, unless we can draw from Ethel herself what we wish to know. I have tried. I have made personal inquiries in the neighbourhood where we found them. My son has done the same. We can discover *nothing*. It is a bad business, a bad business. Ah! Miss Brook," he looked down pityingly on his broad proportions, "troubles like these are enough to swamp a man. But I think much of your judgment, and, knowing you of old, can fully rely on your kindliness of heart. I must send Ethel; perhaps you will be able to make something of her."

"Let me see her, by all means," I answered. "I shall be alone this evening. Have your daughters any engagement?"

"Blanche is going out with me. Ethel refuses all invitations; she sits at home moping, till I begin to fear—I speak to you, Miss Brook, as a friend of the family—that her brain is a little affected. But she shall pay you a visit

this evening, and you can judge for yourself of her state of mind."

"Perhaps she may not care to come?" I suggested, smiling at Mr. Crampton's summary way of disposing of his daughter. "Will you wait a moment? I should like to give my invitation by letter."

I sent a carefully-worded little note, reminding Ethel of our former intimacy, and assuring her of my continued affection.

It had the desired effect. At six o'clock that evening a cab drew up to the door. I went downstairs. Ethel, accompanied by the grim Martha, who would not relinquish her charge until she had seen her disposed of with all assurance of safety, stood in the hall.

Elise had been before me. With a smiling welcome in her bright, black eyes, the French girl was taking away our young visitor's wraps. Then I saw my child again,—my child changed into a stately woman.

Martha gave a little nod of recognition when I appeared, but Ethel drew back. The girl's cheek was flushed, and there was a kind of pain in her eyes.

I put out both my hands.

"Ethel, my child, surely you know that you are always welcome here?"

Martha, satisfied, apparently, moved towards the door. Elise, between smiles and tears, threw open the door of my sitting-room, and drew the softest arm-chair to the little fire which was burning brightly in the grate. Ethel took the offered seat, mechanically, as it were. She appeared like one who was acting in a dream. Before passing into the room, I saw her look round nervously, with a dawn of expectation in her eyes.

I did not notice it at the time, fearing to confuse her. Turning to Elise, I said,—"Don't bring in the lamp yet. The fire-light is pleasant —and, Elise, *you* shall bring us our tea presently; it will seem more home-like, and I know you like to wait upon Miss Ethel."

Which made Ethel look up into the beaming face of the French girl with one of her old smiles.

"Now Mademoiselle is like herself, Madame, *pas vrai!*" said the girl, who was a privileged person in the house; and she left the room, closing the door softly behind her.

Ethel sat very silently in the arm-chair placed

for her. I could see by the fire-light, which played fitfully on her face, that the smile was still on her lips, that the look of pain had passed from her eyes.

"It is pleasant!" she said at last, looking round with a little sigh. "It seems like coming home."

"It *is* coming home," I said, softly, and then I held out my hand. "My poor child, there is always a corner for you here."

"Always?" repeated the girl, a little sadly.

"Yes, Ethel, always; and I know, if Erick were only here, he would say the same. Are you expecting every moment to see him?" I continued, smiling. "I saw you look round just now, as if you thought he might, very possibly, be hidden somewhere."

The smile passed from the girl's lips. She looked at me in some alarm.

"Did I?—I never thought—indeed—that is—" her confusion seemed to grow as she went on. "I am very foolish," she stammered. "I think something must be wrong with me to-night. I seem scarcely to know what I am saying."

Her manner surprised me.

"My dear Ethel," I said, "it was very natural that you should expect to see my nephew here, and you and he were such friends in the old days. I feel very sure of what I say: no one would welcome you home more warmly than Erick."

"I know, I know," answered the girl rapidly. Her cheeks had changed from a dead white to vivid crimson. "You are very good, Miss Brook. It is a great pleasure to me to see you again. You have been living for some time in London, papa says."

Her desire seemed to be to change the subject, to keep to utterly indifferent topics. There was a certain embarrassment in her manner, which perplexed me sorely.

"Ethel," I said, earnestly, "you must not treat me as a stranger. In the old days I used to feel as if you belonged to me, and still, after this long separation, I take the deepest interest in all that concerns you."

"Thank you," she said, a little shortly; and then she covered her face with her hands. "I wish," she continued, in a low voice, "that people would *not* take such an interest in me.

I know it is kindly meant by some, still, it is disagreeable, very."

"Ethel!" I cried, in dismay. I was hurt by this deliberate refusal of confidence.

"Dear Miss Brook,"—the girl looked up now, and into my face; tears were trembling on her eye-lashes, but her voice was calm,—"you are very good to me, too good. The way in which you have received me to-night has touched me to the very soul. Kindness, you see, is becoming a little strange—you don't understand this yet—you will. My father was with you to-day, he asked you to sound me—yes, not in so many words, perhaps—you were to use your influence. I know it all; indeed he has said the same to others, who had not the affection for me that you have. Aunt Ellen,"—it was her childish way of addressing me; my heart contracted, the familiar appellation fell from her lips like a caress,—"Aunt Ellen, I *cannot* bear the pain of refusing *you*. In pity ask me no questions. I am not a child, I am a woman. I understand my position thoroughly. It has cost me bitter pain to keep this silence, but keep it I must—I must. If you knew all, you would help me."

Crossing the room, I stooped over the girl. A fear had taken possession of me; it chilled me to the heart.

"Ethel," I whispered, "you have done—nothing—wrong. There is no reason—?"

"There *is* a reason," she answered, very calmly, and, raising her head, she looked into my face with those great honest eyes, which, from her childhood, I had admired. "If I could tell you, I would— And now, dear Miss Brook, you will be kind, will you not? You will believe in me, you will talk of something else?"

There was a sadness, a wearied depression in the girl's voice and manner that touched me deeply.

"You must take your own way, Ethel," I said. "You know, dear, you were always a spoilt child here. If" — I could not help saying it, though I knew it might give pain— "if, then, you had come to me, Ethel, it would have been better for us all."

"I know it," answered the girl, wearily. "I think most people must feel like this, in looking back. There are so many things we would have done, we would have left undone. Wisdom,

they say, comes by experience. Experience is a little hard sometimes, but, if it bring wisdom, I suppose we ought not to complain."

I smiled. "You are getting metaphysical, Ethel,—plunging us into the maze of Plato's speculations—the relative value of pleasures and pains, pains that acquire pleasures, and pleasures that result in pains."

The girl laughed. "I am more learned than I thought." And then she added, a little bitterly,—"It would be better to do without the pleasures altogether, if they can only be bought at such a price."

"Put for the pleasures the good," I answered, "that great ideal for which ancients and moderns have always been seeking, and no pain will be too great to buy it."

The girl did not answer, she looked thoughtful; and presently came Elise, the tea-tray, and lights. Ethel poured out the tea for me, and we chatted together, on indifferent subjects. Afterwards I asked her to sing.

She made no demur, only stipulating that lights should be kept away from her. She sat down at the piano, which was at the further end of the room, and sang song after song.

Ethel had a full, rich voice, but, at this time, she did not put forth its power. The songs she chose were simple, and she sang them, as her fancy moved her, one after the other, in a low, plaintive voice.

"Ethel," I said, when she rose from the piano, and returned to the fireplace, "you have a fine voice; but it wants cultivation. Would you like to go to Italy?"

The girl's eyes glistened. For the first time that evening she looked animated and bright.

"I should like it better than anything else," she said, earnestly.

"Your father has asked me to advise him, Ethel; shall I advise this?"

"That we should leave home?"—and the girl clasped her hands. "Oh! Miss Brook, if you only knew—"

"How much you want to get away. Poor child!" and I took her hand in mine. "I fear you have suffered even more than I thought."

Ethel drew her hand away. "*Please* say nothing about it. I have been ill, you see, and Blanche looks delicate. A change might do us both good. Do *you* think of going abroad, Miss Brook?"

"I wish I could go," I said, thoughtfully; "but I happen to know a lady, a widow, who is anxious for some such engagement. She might answer for an escort."

"We could not go alone?" suggested Ethel.

"No, my innocent child. You must take care of yourselves, wherever you go; but the proprieties must be cared for by your seniors."

Ethel smiled. "Do you *think* papa will consent?" she asked.

"I hope so," I answered. "I will do my utmost in the way of persuasion."

Almost unconsciously, as I spoke, my mind returned to that other occasion, when I had offered an unsought counsel, when I had urged Mr. Crampton to educate his daughters, and the result had been the importation of Miss Gordon into the clergyman's house.

For the moment the coincidence struck me. I said to myself. "Why should I interfere? This time I will be wise, I will let things take their own course."

But my suggestion of this journey had brought the colour into Ethel's face, and the brightness to her eyes. It would be cruel to disappoint

her. And, after all, it seemed the very best plan that could be devised for her.

I felt keenly for Ethel. I would have staked my life upon her purity and innocence; but, it could not be denied, her position was anomalous. This strange silence laid the girl's character open to serious imputations. Mr. Crampton's want of judgment had no doubt aggravated the mischief. I could see, in my poor Ethel's sensitive face, that the suspicion and consequent avoidal had worked on her painfully. Under the repelling influence of unkindly feeling, her character seemed to be changing. She was growing morbid, fretful, cynical. In her own home, with these influences constantly around her, the pin-pricks of ignominy wounding her spirit, the evil, I felt, could only increase.

A short absence might effect some good, in changing the current of her thoughts, and removing her, for a time, from the gossip-mongers, with whom "out of sight is out of mind." In her absence they would immolate a fresh victim, and the dark spot in her history would be forgotten.

I sat far into the night, thinking out my project for the girls. I went to bed fully

determined to bring about my scheme, if possible.

Could I have known all, I might have judged so differently! But, do we ever know all? We shape our little ends, we steer our devious courses, we would make for this and avoid that, while, all the time, about, around, on every side of us, is a mighty fate, urging us on to the accomplishment of its certain ends.

CHAPTER II.

THE MAJESTY OF GREATNESS

> Such man has been, and such may yet become!
> Aye, wiser, greater, gentler, even than they,
> Who on the fragments of yon shattered dome
> Have stamped the sign of power.—I felt the sway
> Of the vast stream of ages bear away
> My floating thoughts.

Erick Græme had literally obeyed the wise old Frenchwoman. Feeling that she was right, that in the sudden passion which had moved him his senses rather than his heart had spoken, that duty, and not only duty but honour, love, the elements of all that was best and highest in his nature, bound him to the choice he had deliberately made in his opening manhood, he turned his back resolutely on a temptation, which, at the moment, he felt himself too weak to face.

He spent the three months in wandering. At first, he had wished to be utterly cut off

from intercourse with those he had left behind. He believed in Ethel. Her love, which the poor girl had shown only too visibly, had a power on him. He thought he had satisfied her of his affection, and that he should think so was not wonderful. Soft emotion, glad surprise, gentle yielding to an unimagined happiness—this was what Erick had read that day in the simple face of the girl he had asked to be his wife. The re-action had come to Ethel after his departure. Of it he knew nothing. Satisfied of her confidence in his honour, her implicit faith in his affection, he did not even wish to hear from her at first.

As the days glided into weeks, and the weeks into months, he wandered on, forgetting the complications that had driven him from England, enjoying solitary communion with Nature in her wildest scenes, nurturing the poet side of his nature on great thoughts and high dreams.

Erick Græme was young; his soul was plastic; he had a lifetime before him, and, to the young, what is a lifetime in its grand prospective? What but the possibility of infinite and varied good? As he trod the classic shores of

the blue Ægean, as he climbed the hills and traversed the plains of Greece,—saturated with the blood of brave men, martyrs to freedom and truth, alive to the echo of brilliant deeds and glorious enterprise,—his spirit burned within him.

"They live," he said to himself, "the great immortals! They live, while we are perishing, passing away to the dim unknown."

The waves were lapping the shore with plaintive murmuring; the eastern sun was pouring down floods of light and glory; he stood under the shadow thrown by a broken pillar, sole relic of what had once been a temple to the gods. His horse was whinnying by his side; from afar came the voice of his companions, whom he had outstripped in the passionate craving to be alone,—alone, that he might gather into one the surging thoughts which threatened to overwhelm him,—alone, that he might try, in the presence of the great past, to understand himself, to make out of the past a future.

What should he do? The choice lay here before him. Poets, philosophers, orators, generals, politicians—all these had lived and died in that age of beauty. They had written their

names, not on that generation only, but on all the generations that were to come. They had been the great originators; after them the nations had followed.

"If *I* had lived then," said Erick to himself, "I might have been great; but—what is left for us to do? At best, we can but feebly imitate. The age of romance, of lights opening into truth, of new paths leading to vistas of unimagined loveliness,—this age has gone by for ever, and now it is for cold reality, not ideal good, the nations live."

His brow was knit, his dark eyes gleamed. His was the impatience of the young soul that has not yet found for itself a worthy aim.

Standing there under the shadow of the broken, age-stained pillar, the young man himself, with his perfection of form, might have been taken for an impersonation of the past—an Apollo, returning sadly to the scene of his ancient glory, mourning over the desertion of his ruined fanes.

The land was silent, for even those distant voices were heard no more. To Erick's fanciful mind it discoursed eloquently of the living dead. Passing them in review before him, he

tried to reach the secret of their deathlessness.

"What made them great?" he asked himself; and a voice in his spirit answered—was it an accusing voice?—"Strength of purpose, unity of aim."

Bowing his head, Erick sighed. He was pre-eminently a child of the age. Well-educated and deeply read, discursive in genius, capable of traversing great fields of thought, a *dilettante* in the arts, an elegant versifier, a dabbler in science, to him had been wanting —and here, in the midst of the deep solitude, he recognized it—that earnestness of purpose, that concentration of power, which makes the true poet or philosopher, the one or two great men, in whom a generation culminates.

In his boyhood he had had a dream. It had been pure and fair in its proportions, delicate as the Aphrodite of the sensuous Greek, when she rose, a form of light, from the shimmering sea-foam, calm as Hera, the stately Olympian queen. To art as a whole, and pre-eminently to the chief among the arts, that which comprehends them all, mirrors them in her own en-

trancing beauty, the art of poetry, his life was to be devoted.

And—for as the glory of sunset clouds, or the white beauty of an autumn moon, is increased and intensified by the forest pool or flowing river which gives back a reflection of the light, so a loving heart, in receiving and reflecting the brightness of the loved, may even increase the power of shining—he had promised himself the companionship of her who, even in her childhood, had shown herself capable of understanding in a measure the essence of the beautiful and good, of sympathizing with himself in his flights of imagination.

But his purpose was weak. Founded on a vision, it had been incapable of battling with the world of fancies and ideas which lay around him. Leaving the study of nature and art, Erick had followed the fitful lights of humanity. Romance, music, song, like Wandering Fires, lurid but bright, had led him from the region of calm idea, concentrated thought; while a lower beauty, a worldly mind, a heart impure, had caught his unstable fancy—had made him forget the child of his poet-fancy, the guiding star of his boyish dreams.

All this flashed over his mind in the solitude.

"Hitherto," he said to himself, "I have failed of my true aims. I have forsaken the beautiful for the illusory. Instead of the calmness of conscious progress, mine has been the restlessness of wasted powers."

Lifting up his head, he gazed into the blue heavens above him, so far, so deep, so restful, in their absorption of the vivid sunlight. The man, strong in his youth, instinct with the powers and energies of abounding life, was vowing a great vow within himself.

"It shall be so no longer," he said; and his words were breathed out on the silence like a prayer. "Oh! mighty dead, I will live like you. Growing into my work, I will grow with it. All lesser aims shall be subordinated. Like yours, my name shall shine for ever, a star in the temple of fame."

Alas! poor Erick! He was not the first young man who, in the fulness of life and vigour,—a power within him that he fails to understand, a beauty around him that he would touch or die,—had vowed the same vow within himself.

Humanity, in its earth-stained weakness,

would ally itself with the divine. It may; but often—*how* often!—it chooses the wrong means.

By cloud-compelling thunder, by the majesty of greatness, young souls would win their ends; while all the time, down in the valleys, below, not above the strife, the true path is to be found; goodness rather than greatness, service before command; the still, small voice of heavenly love, for the ringing applause of the multitude.

They will not believe, how should they? Their eyes are on the mountains, their glances pierce the clouds. When the eyes are blinded and the ears are dull, when the unsuspected weakness has become a fact, palpable and sure, when the heart is riven and the soul sick, then, and then only, will they seek a surer way. God in His mercy grant that all such seekers may find.

So shall the great law of the skies be fulfilled. So shall earth's failures become heaven's opportunities.

CHAPTER III.

DISCOVERED WEAKNESS.

Slowly there is heard
The music of a breath-suspending song,
Which, like the kiss of love when life is young,
Steeps the faint eyes in darkness sweet and deep;
With ever-changing notes it floats along,
Till on my passive soul there seemed to creep
A melody, like waves on wrinkled sands that leap.

Erick had been a little rash when he had outstripped his companions on this bright day by the Ægean. He thought the time-worn pillar was the ruin they had been seeking. He was mistaken. The actual object of their search lay some miles further on along the coast. The path, such path as there was, ran inland for a certain distance. Attracted by the solitary pillar and the blue gleam of sea, Erick had struck off from the road, while his companions, supposing him to be still in advance of them, had followed it steadily.

And thus it came about that he was left alone in his retreat much longer than he could have expected.

He was not conscious, however, of the flight of time, for these moments were great to his spirit; his mind was full of thoughts, that, passing over him like a flood, hid the land-marks of time and sense. But the long thinking fatigued his brain, the glare of sun and sea dazzled his eyes; there was a drowsiness in the languid breathing of the soft airs, a lulling sound in the murmur of honey-laden bees. The influences of the time became, at last, too strong to be withstood. With his arm around the ancient pillar, and his head on a moss-covered stone, Erick Græme fell asleep.

The hours of the day passed by, the shadows lengthened, the sun declined. His companions, who, to their dismay, had missed him at what, they supposed, would have been the trysting-point, were searching for him far and near. He knew nothing, felt nothing; but, while the body slept, the soul was awake. Strange dreams were coming and going—vivid some, with the semblance of reality; dim others, girt about with mist and shadow.

He was a chief among the mighty tribes that lived in the rocky recesses of the shore, a king, a demi-god, loved, revered, exalted above the weaknesses of humanity. With eagle-eye, he ruled them; with trumpet-tongue, he issued his decrees; and the glory of greatness filled his heart. After the glory came a blackness. They were gathered in countless multitudes, the people he ruled, round one of the rocky caves, and he—the shame of weakness had overcome him before them all, his limbs stiffened, his eyes closed, he was lifeless, and he knew they were laughing their demi-god to scorn. Then he was a god—a mighty being, vast and dim, with wings that spanned the heaven; and still his glory was the same, the glory of being great, till a greater touched him, and he fell, fell to the earth, fell below the earth, down, down to depths immeasurable. Another change came. He was a child, small, weak, helpless, and the pebbles were mountains to him, the hills impassable barriers. In his weakness he wept and moaned, for the remembrance of past existence followed him, till, at last, a hand was stretched out to him, a large hand, fair and white, and, above the hand, all he could see

was a cloud, for his eyes were dim with weeping. But it lifted him, it raised him, and, as he rose, he grew, till the cloud changed into a form of beauty and grandeur, till he was face to face with the calm brow and restful eyes of a stately woman. His weakness passed, he was strong, he would have loosened her hold, in the triumph of once more being conscious of power, but she held him still, whispering in a voice whose every tone was harmony—

"Thou seekest greatness, poor child of mortality! and greatness, with thee, has been transient. Know this, and in thy short day of life act on the knowledge. Love only abideth—Love—Love."

And Earth and Heaven seemed to take up the chorus, to be singing together "Love—Love."

Evening had come, the short twilight had set in, a chill vapour was sweeping over the earth, the wind sighed among the hills. Erick started up suddenly, and rubbed his eyes. Was he dreaming still? Evening had changed the aspect of all around him. He thought he had been alone, too, when he fell asleep, and now, it was very certain, a tumult of many voices was in his ear. He could make no sense of the

words, though they seemed, at first, to take up and combine into one the strains of his dream. Then, all at once, the tumult stopped; a single voice, deep, harmonious, floated out on the air. It sang a strophe, and silence succeeded. There was the sound of trampling steps; they died away in the distance. Once again all was still.

Erick, meanwhile, had been so deeply enthralled by the wild music of the voices, and the strangeness of this ending to his dream, that he had not even looked round his sheltering pillar to find out the cause of the sounds. But silence broke the spell.

He rose hastily to his feet, grasped his gun with an Englishman's belligerent instinct—he would not be taken at a disadvantage—and looked up and down along the coast. One or two wild-looking forms were disappearing behind the angles of rock. One figure alone was near him. It was that of a man, large of limb, massive in structure. His arms were folded on his breast; his long iron-grey hair floated on the wind; his eyes were fixed on the distant horizon, which was fast toning down to the ebon hue of night.

To Erick there was something familiar in the face and form, unpleasantly familiar, though, for the life of him, he could not remember where he had seen the man before.

He started back, with a muttered exclamation. The sound and gesture seemed to arouse his companion from his abstraction. He turned, but expressed no surprise at the sight of a neighbour in the solitude.

"It is you then, *mon beau Monsieur!*" he said, quietly. He spoke English with a slight foreign accent.

"What do you know of me?" asked Erick, unconsciously grasping his gun.

"In truth not much," replied the other; "but, let me advise you, my good sir, put down that dangerous weapon. An Englishman's blood, they say, is hot, and I have that to say which may make yours tingle."

"Are you afraid?" said Erick, scornfully. He did not know the man, but a kind of antagonism had sprung up within him at the sight of his face, the sound of his voice.

The man smiled. "For myself, no—but for you, yes. The rocks are lined with friends of mine, my good young man. I have had trouble

already to keep them from tying together those fine limbs of yours, and carrying you off. But I had compassion, and my word is law. Your pockets have been rifled—true, and by my orders. *Cieux*, how you sleep! One would say yours was the slumber of the innocent."

Erick's temper had been rising as the light, ironical words flowed on. In obedience to a certain impulse, he had put down his gun. He was unarmed, and so was the man he faced. But the cool audacity of this confession, and his mocking manner, were more than the young Englishman could bear.

"Explain yourself," he cried, clenching his fist, "or, by Heaven!—"

"Peace," replied the other, calmly. "You are in my power, and, as Heaven is my witness, I would do you no bodily hurt. See!"

Even as he spoke a gigantic figure lounged into sight, from behind a shoulder of rock.

"Numbers such are within call," he continued, quietly. "They owe me a kind of allegiance; why, Heaven only knows. I am seldom enough with them; when I join them, all I do is to repress their rapacity, to teach them snatches of song—in a word, to humanize them, if I can.

But, as Milordo knows, in self-defence all instruments are weapons of war, I want but a few moments' conversation. I will then re-conduct you to your friends, who are encamped at some little distance."

"What do you mean by detaining me?" asked Erick, fiercely. He knew he was in this man's power, and the consciousness of weakness was bitterly distasteful to his high spirit.

"You did not then remember me?" said the stranger. Turning, he faced the young Englishman, gazing at him steadily, with arms folded on his breast. A moment Erick looked, and, suddenly, the dark flush dyed his cheek.

"I remember you now," he said, slowly. "You are the man who—"

"Yes," replied the other, his eyes flashing from under his shaggy eye-brows. "I see you know. The man who had once an opportunity of doing a good deed,—of becoming beautiful in soul by contemplation of the simple beginnings of goodness, as originated in the soul of a child, and of this opportunity *you* deprived him. I told you I never forget. I had not forgotten. I was seeking for you, *mon beau Monsieur*—for why?—that child has grown into a woman. You

have had the moulding of her—you. I tell you, strange it seems, does it not, to give my confidence so frankly? It is because I know your weakness. This I tell you then: that child has my heart still. I will find the woman, and dispute her with you."

"What do you mean? How dare you speak of her?" Erick's face was white to the very lips, his hands worked convulsively.

"*Pazienza*," said the man, lightly. Drawing back a little, he pulled from his pocket a parcel of letters, and a small miniature. "These I have been fortunate enough to find on your person. The letters may guide my search, they may not. I have not examined them fully yet. This I have discovered, she is not bound to you. The address—your name, is it not so?—corresponds not with the signature of this letter, in which my little friend,—how well I recall her face!—has sent you a likeness of herself. She is fond, poor child; the hand which traced the lines has trembled, yet is the hand noble as the face. Ah! Monsieur, I promise myself—"

"Promise yourself nothing," cried Erick, now thoroughly roused; "but listen to me.

Go near my affianced wife, touch her but with your little finger, look at her with your baleful glance, and, by Heaven! I will kill you like a dog."

In his passion he had raised his voice. With the sound, two or three wild-looking men darted out from the shadows in the rocks. Talking, what seemed to Erick a strange jargon of sounds, they gathered round him, brandishing their weapons. But Erick's opponent, who seemed to be their chief, spoke to them; he raised his hand, their weapons fell, they formed a circle round him. He smiled. "They will not believe I am in no danger," he said; "they are in a state of strong indignation against you, for they understood the threat in your voice. My poor, faithful followers! Ah! we might make here a peaceful kingdom—the beautiful child for the queen. Listen, I will still them in a moment."

He waved his hand; there was an utter silence, and, through the silence, he lifted his voice in a low, plaintive melody. Rising and falling in sweet succession, the liquid sounds floated out on the still night-air. They seemed to penetrate the soul, to thrill to its very depths.

The effect was magical. Within the circle of these tones, mighty but tender, no other sound could live. Even the air seemed to pause lest their sweetness should die too soon. The wild men stood silent—breathless. Tears poured down the cheeks of some, others looked instinctively to the star-lit skies, which seemed akin to these pathetic strains.

And Erick? He struggled against the influence, but even for him it was too strong. The highly-cultivated man, accustomed to beauty of sight and sound, stood entranced, listening, in spite of himself.

The song flowed on, and, at first, fighting against the sympathetic yielding of his sensuous soul, he hated the man who was subduing him by weapons so softly magical, despised himself for feeling the power of the music; then gradually his heart began to melt, his spirit to pass from the thraldom of his will. To hatred succeeded love—love for the floating voice that had entranced him, an unrestrained ecstacy of joy. Sighing, he sank to the ground, and covered his face with his hands.

When silence succeeded,—a silence that, for the moment, was absolute pain,—he looked up.

The stranger was standing alone; he had a lantern in his hand.

"Come," he said. "Are you ready? I will take you to your friends. But first—for, as *my* friends have reminded me, the soldiery is with you, and many of the men you have seen are outlaws from society—you must promise to reveal nothing you have heard or seen."

And, as Erick hesitated,—"My good sir," he continued, "haste then to a decision. Reflect. We can keep you here if we like,—you are in our power."

"I promise," said Erick, hastily; and they moved away together into the darkness.

But the adventures of this strange night were not over. Possessed by a fear of treachery, Erick kept his eyes and ears open, as he and his guide passed together over the rugged ground.

They had not gone many steps before he became conscious of a stealthy following; once, indeed, a dark shadow was thrown across his path.

But his guide, if he noticed it, would not appear to do so. Erick looked at him; his face was calm, an inscrutable smile played about his lips.

"Does he mean to assassinate me in the dark?" thought the young man; and the idea was anything but pleasant. He stopped short.

"Do you know that we are being followed?"

"I *know*," replied the other; "but I can assure you it is a matter of little moment."

"To you probably not," said Erick, bitterly. "I am in the midst of enemies, and must act with circumspection."

Turning suddenly in the direction of the sound, he grasped his gun and stood on the defensive. His guide seized him by the arm.

"Foolish young man! would you shoot down a woman? She deserves it for this folly. Still—"

"A woman!" gasped Erick.

The darkness was gathering. All he could see was the outline of a form in the distance. Slowly it crept nearer, and he saw that the form was draped; then a white, haggard face, mad, eager eyes, and a black cloud of hair, grew out of the darkness. He stood aghast. Were the wonders of this strange night ever to cease?

"You see," said his guide, shortly, and, turning, he was about to hasten on; but Erick detained him.

"She is in distress, she wants something," he said. "Surely you will let her come up to us?"

The man shrugged his shoulders. "As you will." Then, to the woman, who in some timidity and hesitation, as it seemed, had drawn near to him, he said in French, "Marguerite, what means this folly?"

She answered in the same language. Clasping her hands, she crouched down before him on the ground. "Léon, in pity kill me. I am bad, foolish, unfit to live."

"All you say is true," he answered, sternly. "Why did you leave the place I assigned you?"

"I wanted you, Léon; I wanted you. Ah! *mon Dieu!* you have killed my soul. It goes out with you. It will not be satisfied with past happiness; it craves more—more."

"You have not answered my question," he replied, sternly still.

"Speak to me more gently, Léon," she said, pleadingly. "I will never trouble you more, for now I know you have made to yourself another joy. I only wished to be sure."

"This, then, was your reason?" he replied. "You followed me—how?"

"Marcus helped me," she said. Then, in tones of wild entreaty,—"Léon, in pity, look not at me so. You draw out the words. I had intended not to tell. *Le pauvre Marcus. Il t'aime.*"

"Marcus is dismissed," he said, sternly. "And as for you—Heaven knows what I once found to love in you!—you are the curse of my life. Go."

She was still crouching at his feet. Clinging to his knees, she refused to let him move.

"Let me stay with you," she cried, passionately. "Léon, have pity. One day. Once more at evening to hear your voice floating on the breeze, rising to the skies. It was heaven. Sitting there alone under the rocks I could have died. I wished to die, for then my spirit might be near you, Léon; fearing neither repulse nor insult, I might listen to that music whose sweetness first betrayed me."

As he heard her words, the man's face softened. "Marguerite," he said, "you are foolish, mad. Leave me, for the present, at least."

And he looked meaningly at his companion,

who had been listening mutely to this rapid dialogue.

"*C'est vrai*," she answered, "the young *Apollon; m'est égal*, Léon. He believes not in thee. He will guard his treasure—if he can."

With a wild laugh, she rose to her feet and disappeared among the bushes, leaving Erick more bewildered than ever.

CHAPTER IV.

HINDRANCES AND DELAYS.

What mountain-like conceptions swell the mind!
What monumental molehills we achieve!

This, then, was the man who had designs on the liberty of the pure young English girl whom Erick had first trained for himself, and then been on the point of deserting. Alone in his tent, sleepers around him, but sleepless himself, he tried to detach the reality from the illusion, the facts from the dreams of this strange day and night.

He searched his pockets. A likeness of Ethel and two or three of her simple letters had been in his pocket-book; it held also a large sum of money. The money was untouched, the letters and likeness were gone. The likeness would renew this stranger's memory of the girl, the letters would give him the address of her retreat.

Erick, it must be remembered, believed that Ethel and Blanche were still under the care of

Madame de Motteville. Some weeks previously, when he was staying in Paris, he had written to his old friend, giving her his hotel there as the address to which letters should be sent; but his trip to Greece had been hastily arranged, and his movements being necessarily uncertain, he had left in Paris no orders about the forwarding of letters. His was the calm assurance of a young man, whose wishes have never yet met with a serious hindrance. He could not believe that Madame de Motteville would wish to communicate anything of much importance; for the two or three weeks of his unsettled wandering, the letters, he believed, could safely wait.

But what he had heard that night made him vaguely uneasy. He blamed himself for being unduly moved. The man's declaration could have meant nothing, and, if it did, how should this unknown foreigner gain access to the girls, watched over, as they were, by the wise old French lady, who was, Erick knew, well versed in the ways of the world? With Madame, Ethel was absolutely safe. And yet, reason as he would, a certain longing came over the young man to hear from them, or of them.

He determined to return to Paris at once, writing to Madame, in the mean time, a word of warning about the foreigner. If the letters should prove to be satisfactory, he would still hold to his plan of remaining absent a year; if not, he would return home instantly. This determination formed, he tried to rest; but, for once in his life, sleep was coy. There was a restlessness about him, which he tried in vain to understand.

His dream and his awakening, the thoughts of greatness, the actual discovered weakness, brought a kind of aching to his brain, while the wild night-scene, the chorus of sounds, the magical power of that one voice, haunted him like a dream of reality.

He would even have disbelieved the testimony of his senses, but the evidence of actuality lay before him. Under his hand was the rifled pocket-book. As he thought of this, another circumstance faced him. Starting up suddenly, he remembered that his guide had conducted him on foot to the encampment. His horse, then, was gone, and this of itself was sufficient to delay his return into civilized regions.

The whole of the party, travellers and escort, were mounted, and none would care to be left behind, for the country was in an unsettled state.

Groups of disbanded patriots, who, the war of independence over, could find neither recognition of their services nor subsistence, save in the way of plunder, infested the rocks.

These outlaws did not dare to come into collision with the soldiery, for many of them had fought side by side with those who now formed the army of defence; but it was their habit to seize defenceless travellers, and keep them till a large ransom should be offered. Poor fellows! Many of them would have lived differently if they could. This was their way of revenging themselves on society for its neglect.

In the morning, Erick discovered that a further misfortune had happened. Two more horses had gone astray. He was bound to secrecy; but, in his impatience, he gnashed his teeth: he recognized here the hand of his enemy.

They pressed on as fast as they could; but the missing horses delayed them, and several nights and days passed before Athens was sighted. There Erick found himself further delayed. He had just missed the Trieste

steamer. It would be necessary to wait for the next, that is to say, three whole days. But, truth to tell, the young man's impatience had, in a measure, cooled. The more he thought over past occurrences, the more certain it seemed to him that the stranger's threat was vain, or, at least, impossible of execution.

Ethel was at home, in perfect safety. He had promised his old friend to act with deliberation, to remain away until he should be fully determined, in his own mind, about the course it was right for him to pursue. And Erick wavered still. The fact was this: his love for Ethel was not the love of a man, it was the fancy of a boy. It partook rather of the nature of intellectual affinity than sensuous passion. Very possibly Erick might change; but, for the moment, he did not even wish to bind himself.

He wandered on a little listlessly, trying to satisfy his soul, craving for great things, by observing, annotating, comparing, gathering together, as he said to himself, materials for further labour.

But the mind will not be forced. It partakes of the infinite, in its natural independence, its impatience of the controls of the will. Or, is

Plato's sublime parable true? Has the mighty thing we call a soul two moving powers, one, white and winged, urging it upwards, to the contemplation of pure form, deathless idea; the other, dark and rebellious, dragging it down, holding it imperiously to earth-stained realities?

This would aptly illustrate our hero's condition, as he journeyed on towards the north. It was as if two mighty forces were contending within him for mastery over his will, for subjugation of his life.

At last Paris was reached. He went at once to his hotel, hoping, by the intelligence he should find there, to be able to decide more definitely about his future.

To his consternation, he was told that no letters were awaiting him.

Thinking there must have been some mistake, he made every inquiry.

The result was unsatisfactory, and, vaguely uneasy, Erick had determined on a hasty return home, that he might discover for himself the reason for Madame de Motteville's extraordinary silence, when an event happened which, once more, changed the current of his thoughts.

CHAPTER V.

LAYING THE TRAIN.

Subtle she is, and practised in the arts
By which the wanton conquer heedless hearts.

In the breakfast-room of one of the great Paris hotels sat Mr. Clifford. The dapper little gentleman looked uneasy, and out of his element.

Waiters were fluttering about him, a luxurious breakfast was on the little table which faced him, the rattling of knives and forks showed that every one in the room was occupied in the great business of eating and drinking. And many of these busy ones were Mr. Clifford's compatriots, as was evident by the preponderance of yellow beards, ruddy complexions, and burly forms. Mr. Clifford might have felt at home, but he did not. As, somewhat discontentedly, he chipped the shell of his egg, he wondered what would become of him through the long hours of the day.

This was the poor man's daily care. How

those long hours went by at all, he found it difficult to conceive.

He had spent about a month in Paris; he had been dragged to the galleries and churches, the Emperor's tomb, and the Chapelle Expiatoire; he had haunted the Palais Royal and the boulevards; he had, through his courier, hunted up amusements for the ladies; he had, unhesitatingly, settled all milliners' bills; he had shown himself, in fact, an exceptionally dutiful and generous husband. But the sameness was beginning to pall upon him grievously. He missed his morning papers, his business letters, his City friends. True, he could see *Galignani*, while, in the reading-room of the hotel, he could meet Britons of every kind and degree; but *Galignani* was insufficient, and of Britons abroad the City-man was suspicious. Their reason, at least when unaccompanied by ladies, for crossing the Channel was not sufficiently obvious to his understanding. From unknown compatriots, therefore, Mr. Clifford kept aloof, and with Frenchmen he could not converse. To say the least of it, the position was trying, and, at last, the good man felt that he could bear it no longer.

"I shall put a stop to it," said he to himself, that morning. "We have been in Paris long enough." Happy thought! Immediately after breakfast, he would see the courier, and arrange with him about the next stage in their journey. This would consume an hour or two; after that he could see the ladies and win them over to his views; then the photographer might be hurried with those likenesses, the various mementoes of Paris might be packed and despatched to England; by that time surely the lunch-hour would have arrived. In the afternoon letters would have to be written to friends at home, giving their new address.

Mr. Clifford rubbed his hands, his face looked absolutely gleeful. Here was business enough to fill a day. Delighted with his own invention, he hurried over breakfast, and bustled off to find the courier.

"*L'homme propose*," This poor little man was very fond of proposing—disposing was a very different thing, as, unhappily for himself, he had given in to petticoat-dominion.

Not that the languid Mrs. Clifford had ever been able to do much in the way of command; her *rôle* was that of a martyr's submission. A

cleverer woman than Mrs. Clifford held the reins of government, and a very light touch from the companion's hand was sufficient to guide and turn this man, who in the City was known to be "hard as bricks,"—"made of figures."

Miss Gordon had not the slightest intention of leaving Paris, nor did she intend to remain there alone. Mr. Clifford met her on the stairs that morning. She was dressed in an elegant morning toilette, her eyes gleamed, there was bright colour in her cheeks.

She put out her hand when she saw him. "Are you going to find Mrs. Clifford?" she said. "She does not seem very well to-day. I left her asleep. Come with me to the drawing-room, that we may discuss our plans for the day."

She slipped her arm into his affectionately. Was it in human nature not to feel flattered and pleased?

"I am at your service, my dear," he answered; "and I wanted to speak to you particularly. Don't you begin to feel a little tired of Paris?"

"Tired of Paris!" laughed the girl. "Do

I look tired?" And then, reading the dismay in his face,—"Now, what a selfish creature I am! Dear Mr. Clifford, I understand perfectly. This life that is *so* delightful to us—and I think you better than an angel for bringing me to Paris—has become tiresome to you. There is so little for a gentleman to do. A man's mind can't be satisfied with those paltry little things that please women."

"Stop, my dear," broke in the City-man, more and more flattered. "I didn't say *that*, you know."

"But you meant it," replied Eleanor. "Ah! yes, don't deny it. This kind of life is becoming irksome to you. You long to get back to London. Well, now!"—she knit her brows, affecting to think deeply,—"what had we better do? Mrs. Clifford has set her heart on this *matinée*."

"Mattiny?" stammered Mr. Clifford.

"I thought I told you. Yes, surely you remember—last night, after the opera!"

"My dear, I have not the vaguest recollection."

She laughed. "Well! I intended to tell you. It comes, perhaps, to the same thing in

the end. We always count upon your kindness, dear Mr. Clifford, in these matters, and this time, I fear, if indiscretion there be, you must put it to my account. I persuaded Mrs. Clifford to invite a few people, and hire some famous musicians. You see we have been at several entertainments."

"But travellers are not expected—"

"Yes, but travellers are," interrupted the young lady, saucily. "However, Mr. Clifford, I know it is your affair. Of course I shall be a little disappointed. A *very* old friend of mine —did I ever tell you that I met Mr. Græme long ago?—has come to Paris. He is in the hotel now, on his way back to England, for his marriage, I believe." She looked down, and sighed. "We had wished to invite him, and—"

Eleanor Gordon had struck the right chord. Mr. Clifford's heart was tender. This, then, was the mysterious grief he had compassionated. The poor girl had loved the fine, handsome young man. Doubtless he had treated her ill; still she wanted to see him,—to show him, perhaps, that she had friends,—that she was independent of him.

Proud of his own acuteness, Mr. Clifford smiled sympathetically. He was wavering.

"When is this affair to come off?" he asked.

"But it is not to come off at all," answered Eleanor, stoutly. "I have said it was principally my affair; got up by Mrs. Clifford, I really believe, solely to gratify me. We have not asked everybody yet. Those we have asked we can put off easily."

Mr. Clifford felt it was his turn to be amiable.

"Come, come," he said, good-naturedly, "you are a good girl, and I can't bear to disappoint you. Have your mattiny, or whatever you like to call it. I'll run back to London for a day or two."

"How good you are!" said Eleanor, putting out her hand; "I scarcely know how to thank you. And the wonderful part of it is," she added, in a low, meaning voice, "that you seem to understand me so thoroughly."

Mr. Clifford's plans had been overruled, and his wishes deliberately set aside; nevertheless, when he turned away from Eleanor Gordon that day, there was a smile on his lips,—self-satisfaction and universal benevolence were glowing warm at his heart.

"Strange," he said to himself, between the whiffs of a cigar. "I never understood another woman, not even my wife; but this poor, dear girl is *so* transparent. Well for her she's among friends."

Later in the day, he gave orders that a large suite of apartments, just vacated by a Russian prince, should be engaged for his wife, and went out to buy an elaborate set of ornaments for his wife's companion.

"The young fellow shall see that we value her, at least," he muttered.

Eleanor, in the mean time, had other business to transact. Leaving the drawing-room, she crossed the hall, passed through several passages, and knocked at the door of a numbered room. A sleek woman, dressed in some soft material, came to the door.

"Come in, Miss Gordon," she said, rather familiarly, when she saw who her visitor was.

Eleanor sat down. "I was almost afraid you had gone out, Turner," she said.

"Oh, dear no, Miss; *my* business can wait; yours, at least, so it appears to me, can't abide no delay."

The face of the companion had changed from red to white, as the woman spoke.

"My good Turner," she said, softly, "I know your kindness; but, tell me,—for, as you say, my business can bear no delay,—have you seen him?"

"Yes, and a fine handsome young man he is, as ever I set my eyes on,—too good, I'm thinking, for the likes of you and me."

Eleanor was trembling from head to foot; but, when she spoke, her voice was calm. This woman had disciplined her every organ—eyes, voice, manner, were strictly under the dominion of her strong will.

"I think you delight in teazing me, dear Turner; but, never mind, I can bear a considerable amount from you."

"And that's true," replied the woman, coarsely; "nor friendship to thank for it neither, Miss Gordon. However, we're wasting time. I've to tell you he's gone out, five minutes since, to the Changs Illysien, they say. Stop a bit."

For Eleanor had risen from the chair, and was making her way rapidly to the door.

"You're in a terrible hurry to be off," she continued, fixing the girl with her glittering

eyes. "What would you give me for this now? I took it from under his very nose this morning. It make me laugh to think of it, and in a fever he was, too—seemed to think something was wrong; but them Frenchmen's a stupid lot."

She held up a letter.

"Give it to me," cried Eleanor, panting with impatience.

"The price," said the woman, calmly, putting aside the outstretched hand, and smiling grimly at her eagerness. "*I* don't work for nothing, if other folk does."

"Take everything I possess," cried the girl, "only, for pity's sake, give me the letter, and let me go."

"It wouldn't do to take everything at once; supplies might be stopped;" and, giving up the letter, the woman took Miss Gordon's purse from her pocket, and drew out of it an English bank-note.

The letter was from Miss Brook. Eleanor ascertained this fact; then, after doing away with the traces of agitation, and, dressing herself with minute care, she went to walk in the Champs Elysées.

CHAPTER VI.

MISS GORDON GAINS HER POINT.

Upon her tongue did such smooth mischief dwell,
And from her lips such welcome flattery fell,
Th' unguarded youth, in silken fetters ty'd,
Resign'd his reason and with ease comply'd.

It was a lovely autumn day. The sky was of that dark, clear blue which comes after a shower; the rain had laid the dust, the trees had put on their autumn dress. Down the long avenue of the Champs Elysées were brown tints and red tints; naked trees, that shook, cloud-like, in the wind, and fountains that glimmered in the sunshine; ending all in that white wonder, crowning delight of a Parisian's heart, the Arc de Triomphe.

Under the trees walked Erick Græme, slowly, meditatively, his eyes fixed vacantly on the distance, his brows contracted. White-capped nurses looked at him curiously, admiring him for his fine manly proportions; baby-coquettes

practised their airs and graces before him; children, smaller still, ran up against his knees. He saw none of them. He was absorbed in thought.

No letters, not one; this was the mystery that filled the young man's mind that day. It was unlike his old friend to be disregardful of his wishes; it was unlike Ethel, especially under the circumstances, to preserve so strange a silence. Could the letters have been lost? But he had written both to Madame and to Ethel from Athens; he had urged them to answer him by return. It would be strange indeed if not only the former letters but these later answers should have gone astray. There was only one other explanation. They were ill; something had happened. And yet, if Madame had been incapable, Ethel could have written a line, or Blanche. Erick shook his head. One thing alone was certain. He could not bear the suspense. He would return to England by the evening mail.

With the decision his step quickened. In a state of suspense nothing is so miserable as inaction; having determined to act, Erick felt more hopeful about the result.

He had reached the spot where, three years before, he had first met his old friend. Even to think of her seemed to do Erick good. She was connected in his mind with his best and purest feelings. It was pleasant to the young man to think of her gentleness, her old-world beauty, even her poverty and helplessness, for he had rescued her.

Smiling to himself a soft and tender smile, that made his face look beautiful, he recalled the incidents of that day. And—for to think of Madame without the children, as he always called Ethel and Blanche, would have been impossible—the memory of his old friend brought Ethel's face before his mind: her face, as he had seen it on the day when they parted—surprise, love, and joy unfeigned, struggling there for expression, swallowed up all in an infinite tenderness, as, putting her hand in his, she had answered, softly,—"Yes, Erick, dear, I think I must have always loved you."

Madame's counsel to Erick had been a wise one. Already the separation, the old memories, the knowledge of Ethel's faithful love, and the want of a sympathizer in his higher flights of

imagination, were working on his mind. Slowly, but surely, a truer love for the friend of his boyhood was beginning to take possession of his soul, while with it came the fear, scarcely hinted even to himself, but darkly suggested by this ominous silence, the fear of losing her; and this, to a young man, is a strong impelling force.

"I wonder why I left them at all," said Erick to himself, with a sudden impatience.

Scarcely had the thought crossed his mind before his attention was irresistibly drawn by a lady, who passed and repassed the little colony of chairs where he had found a seat. The lady was dressed in dark green velvet, which fitted closely to her slight figure, and fell in rich folds about her feet; over it, and contrasting strangely with its darkness, streamed two or three escaped locks of yellow hair; soft lace was about her neck and wrists; a black Spanish mantilla, thrown loosely over her head, half hid her features. She was gliding rather than walking, looking from this side to that with apparent embarrassment. Many turned to look at the fair stranger as she passed. There was something peculiar in her dress and appear-

ance, but the peculiarity was pleasant and harmonious.

Erick's artistic fancy was pleased. He followed the lady with his eyes; when she passed on he rose and walked slowly in the direction she had taken. He had no intention of following her. He wished simply to gratify himself by the sight of what was pleasant to his eyes,—to gain, perhaps, an idea. She seemed strangely to personify a fancy that had been floating through his brain. All this Erick said to himself to account for his sudden fancy. Perhaps the real fact was that he was idle and curious. He felt a desire to see what that black mantilla so jealously concealed. His desire was destined to be gratified. As he gained upon the lady, she stopped; then suddenly she faced him, and the black mantilla fell back upon her shoulders. Erick started back. He recognized Eleanor in a moment; but well as he thought he knew her, he was scarcely prepared for this. Love had made this woman beautiful; her bright blue eyes glistened and shone, her cheeks glowed with soft colour, her full red lips quivered.

"Erick!" she cried, holding out both her hands, with a plaintive pleading, which agitated

him strangely. But he restrained himself. His old friend's pure presence and Ethel's tender voice were near his heart. Flushing in spite of himself, he returned the impulsive greeting by a stately bow.

"Miss Gordon! I certainly did not expect to meet *you* here."

The blue eyes filled with tears. "You distrust me, Erick. Yes, it is well; how could it be otherwise? I am not worthy of your confidence; and yet, my friend, believe me, in the wide world there lives not one who has your interest at heart as I have."

"Your interest is misplaced," answered Erick, a little impatiently. He was struggling against the fatal charm, angry and perplexed to find that it held him still.

She smiled. "Mr. Græme," she answered, softly, "you are distressed and anxious. Yes, I can read it in your face. I wonder what you would say if I told you that *I* knew your trouble, that *I* could explain the mystery which troubles you at this moment? I have something to tell you, but I dare not say it here." She drew the mantilla about her face, and looked round anxiously. "I know people; I may be

remarked; and you, *mon cher*, are *tellement beau.*"

"I wish you would tell me what I can do for you at once," interrupted Erick. He was hardening his heart against the soft touches of those white hands, the winning sweetness of that low-toned voice.

He knew, in his youthful keenness, he felt, that they wanted truth; and yet he watched the fingers, hungry for their contact, and yet he listened to the voice, ravished by its sweetness.

"You do not understand me," she said, sadly; "for me you can do nothing." Stopping, she drew a little casket from her breast. "See," she said, "here are my credentials."

It was a little blue velvet ring-case. Erick looked at it, and a sudden fear struck chill at his heart. Seizing it with little ceremony, he tore it open. His fear was realized. Lying embedded in the white silk was poor Ethel's heart-shaped ring.

The young man's first feeling was one of vague suspicion. He caught Eleanor by the arm. "How did you come by this?" he cried.

She drew herself from his grasp. "Be

patient," she said, a little sternly; "or I vow I will tell you nothing." And then her voice changed into one of plaintive entreaty. "Have you no feeling for me, Erick?"

"Forgive me," he said, earnestly, "you see—"

She broke him short with one of her charming smiles.

"I have forgiven you already," she said. "Do you know, Erick, I think I could forgive you anything when you look as you do now. But go, *mon cher*, fetch me one of those little close carriages. We must drive together to the Bois. In some quiet nook there I will tell you all you wish to know."

There was a certain authority in her manner. Little by little, she was resuming her old ascendancy. Erick struggled, but Erick obeyed.

"It is for Ethel's sake," he said to himself; "she has sent me a message." Yet, as he fulfilled Miss Gordon's request, he wondered. Could Ethel have chosen no other messenger? and why could not the message be given without all this mystery and delay? Why? Erick stopped suddenly. His head felt dizzy, his pulses throbbed. He almost forgot his errand

in the momentary excitement. Why? He looked back to where he had left Eleanor, sitting under the trees, waiting for his return. Had she divined his thoughts? The white hands were clasped; the soft eyes were following him, resting on him, pleading with him. Why? And as the question answered itself to his consciousness, the young man's first impulse was to run away, never to look on her face again: it was dangerous. His first impulse, yes; but only his first. With the next, those fair images of the past grew faint, dim, cold—like the picture of a dead saint by the glow of a living reality.

A little close carriage was passing; he hired it. In a moment Eleanor Gordon was by his side.

"Thank you," said the eloquent eyes. There was no triumph in their light, only a touching gratitude, a plaintive appeal.

Not a word was spoken; but, as they drove on together, through the leafy avenue, by dazzling fountains, and white stately mansions, their eyes met—their eyes, and then their hands.

"He is beginning to understand," said Eleanor, to herself.

And Erick. The ring of his betrothed was in his hand; he had come out to receive her message; a moment ago her memory had been warm at his heart. A moment, and he had forgotten even what brought him and his companion together.

Wandering Fires! Wandering Fires! Was there no good angel near to warn the unwary heart?—to show him that in the beauty was destruction?

CHAPTER VII.

ERICK FALLS INTO THE SNARE.

Thus does the ox to his sure slaughter go,
And thus is senseless of th' impending blow;
Thus flies the simple bird into the snare
That skilful fowlers for his life prepare.

They were sitting on a green bank, that overlooked the lake, Eleanor with her back against a tree, Erick stretched luxuriously at her feet; above them, but entirely shut out by the trees, went the never-ceasing torrent of carriages and foot-passengers; below were the waters of the blue lake, faintly agitated by the mimic cascade, tumbling over masses of rock and stone.

They were alone in their retreat, as it was rather late in the year for French men and women to risk their health by sitting about under the trees. More prudent than our English friends, they were hurrying on to the shelter of the restaurants. Eleanor and Erick

had as much solitude as they could have desired. And yet the young man asked no question about the mystery which she had promised to reveal.

He sat very still, gazing out upon the lake. His hand rested—was it unconsciously?—on a fold of the velvet dress she wore. And Eleanor was looking down upon him. Her cheek was flushed. Strange thoughts—and very unwonted for her—were making havoc in her brain.

"I am mercenary," said this woman to herself, as she watched him. "I know it; and yet—Erick, Erick—would to Heaven you had never a penny. If,"—and her face grew soft,—"if only *I* might work for you, scheme for you, bring you all the light and gladness that a nature such as yours must have; but—you are rich, my dear, and I am poor. I love you; and you—yes—you will allow me to play with you a little; but even this is at the cost of deception."

He had turned his face towards her, and she smiled.

"What are you thinking of?" he asked.

She answered, as simply as a little girl,

"You, *mon ami*—" She paused a moment, then continued, in a low, musical voice, "Your face looks happier than it did, Erick. When I saw you just now—no, look the other way, dear," —she drew the black mantilla over her face. "When I saw you sitting there under the trees a cloud was about you,—you looked sad, perplexed, troubled. I love to see the happiness in your face, Erick; it pains me to see you sad, though I know that what I have to say will bring back the cloud. I am thinking, *mon ami*, how it may best be told."

Erick started up. "I had almost forgotten," he said, in a stifled voice. "Tell me now, Eleanor; and if it should give me pain, why—"

She broke him short, speaking with some dignity,—"*Mon cher*, there are questions it is better not to ask."

"And this is among them?" said Erick, a touch of sarcasm in his voice. "So be it then."

"Look there," cried Eleanor.

In his rapid movement he had dropped the little ring-case. It was rolling down the grassy slope. Erick was only just in time to prevent it from falling into the water. When he picked it up the blue velvet was spotted and stained.

With a certain indefinable pang, Erick looked at the pretty trinket. It seemed to recall him to himself.

"Apparently it is safer in your keeping than in mine," he said, with a bitter little laugh.

"You must know how it came into my keeping, Erick," she replied, gently. "I am sorry for you, but, after all, it is comprehensible enough. She is a very young girl, and you have kept her in close seclusion. To such a one a first glimpse of the world must be irresistibly charming."

"You don't mean," cried Erick, "that Ethel sends this back to me by you, because—"

She tapped him lightly on the shoulder.

"Impatient, impulsive boy! Is it to vex me that you pretend to care so very much? Listen, and you shall hear all. It was I who discovered Ethel and Blanche in the lovely little retreat you made for them. Do not be angry, Erick, it was purely accidental; and how could I know that *you* took an interest in hiding them? I gave their father the address, and he went at once to find them. He told me about it later. Your friend, the beautiful old French lady, gave them up at once on the

girls' assurance that he was really their father. At their own home I met the girls, and was fortunate enough to secure Ethel by herself for about half-an-hour; then she told me about her life during those years of absence from home. I say fortunate,"—she was answering a look of surprise in his face,—"because of the interest I take in my old pupil, and—in another. Ethel was gratified at my seeking her out,—I could read so much in her eyes. Poor girl! I think she soon saw how foolishly she had misunderstood me in the old days, how truly I had always been her friend; and, at this time, she was in need of a friend. You know Mr. Crampton? He has been kind to me, so I will not enlarge upon his weaknesses; still, knowing the man, you will easily understand how, even out of his daughters' flight and return, he had made a kind of pedestal for self-glorification. In his neighbourhood, Miss Crampton had become the fashion. When I met her, the girl's head was nearly turned with the incense she had received. She is good-looking, and very attractive in manner; the men are perfectly wild about her; and she, poor girl! knows so very little of the world, that—"

Miss Gordon hesitated, as if at a loss for some expression. Erick was sitting on an old tree-stump, his hands were on his knees, his eyes looked out fiercely over the blue waters.

"Go on," he said, in a low, stern voice.

And she answered, plaintively,—"Erick, I am a little afraid. My poor Ethel! It is furthest from my wish to prejudice her in your opinion; and yet— Well! she was ignorant, you see, and young. The attentions flattered her, I suppose; she received them eagerly, hiding from every one the fact of her engagement. Now, Mr. Græme, comes the sad part of my story. Madame de Motteville, as I have told you, gave up the children. The heart of the old lady was sad, her life became very lonely. In that interview with Ethel of which I have spoken, I urged her to pay her old friend a visit—offered, indeed, to gain her father's permission. Ethel would not be persuaded. She was too busy, she said. Not being rich, her dress occupied so much time; besides, her father was giving her singing-lessons; she had to practise several hours every day. Mr. Græme, you look downcast. To cut a long story short, I made up my mind to visit the

old French lady myself, and give her that news of her children for which I felt she was pining."

Again Eleanor Gordon paused; her voice deepened, her blue eyes filled. "For your sake, I was glad that I had gone; for I was just in time. The shock had been too great for her—Madame was dying—dying; and even the faithful Barbe was away. She had gone, as I afterwards learnt, to establish her nieces in a London house of business; only a hired servant was with your friend."

Miss Gordon waited, but no answer came. To poor Erick the blow was so sudden, so unexpected.

"Look up; be comforted," she said, in a low tone. "A few more words, and I have done. It was from Madame I had this ring. Even before Ethel left her old friend she had changed her mind, or, rather, perhaps her fancy. Erick," —the words were spoken earnestly, they seemed to have broken from her in spite of herself,— "she could *never, never* have truly loved you. She was too young, she said; she wished to see more of the world. She had felt it at the time, but had dared say nothing, so great was your

power over her will. Madame was to send back the ring; to tell you—and, indeed, your poor old friend was in the very act of writing to you. I have the paper—here are her last words."

Almost mechanically Erick took the paper from her hand. Yes. The simply-told tale was only too true. He recognized the faint, trembling handwriting; there was a break in the middle of a word, a splash of ink where the pen had fallen. And this was all. Thus was the double mystery explained. Madame was dead, Ethel untrue! In the first moment it seemed more than the young man could bear.

Turning from his would-be comforter, Erick walked with a rapid stride into the woods, and Eleanor Gordon sat alone, in the spot where he had left her. Her cheek was pale, her lips quivered.

"Have I overreached myself?" she thought, bitterly. "Am I to be nothing, nothing to him, even in his desolation? Did he really and truly care for her?"

She was getting very cold. She shivered once or twice; but she would not move. "If he have not the manliness to come and seek me," she said, to herself, "I will remain here."

Very slowly the minutes passed. Her face grew paler, her features more set, her hands were cold as ice, her temples throbbed. Then, at last, he came, moving silently through the trees.

She caught back her breath with a sob, this clever, self-contained woman, who knew the world. But Erick was young and impressionable; he had not yet learnt to weigh and judge. The trouble in her face, the wan pallor, the ill-concealed agitation, affected him more than all the previous colour and glow.

He stooped over her.

"Forgive me, Eleanor; I am a selfish brute; but, how could I tell that you cared so much?"

He took the little cold hands, and pressed them together in his warm grasp.

"Thank God!" he said, in a low, pained voice, "that there are *some* women in the world who know how to love!"

She raised her eyes to his with a speechless gratitude. Stooping, he kissed her on the brow. He could not have helped it, the soft eyes seemed to be asking for love. And then—poor fellow!—his heart felt so lonely.

"Come," he said. With her hand on his

arm, and her heart in a blissful dream, she went back to the little close carriage, which waited for them in the nearest avenue.

They drove home together, and Eleanor grew into belief in herself and the success of her deeply-laid schemes; while Erick, trying to throw off the past, dismissed his fears, and prepared himself to enjoy the loving sympathy which was offered to him so artlessly.

END OF VOL. II.

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